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THE GENTLE VULTURES

by ISAAC ASIMOV

illustrated by EMSH

The Hurrians could not understand why Earth didn't have its nuclear war. Everything was set up for it, and on other worlds it had always happened on time

FOR fifteen years now, the Hurrians had maintained their base on the other side of the Moon.

It was unprecedented; unheard of. No Hurrian had dreamed it possible to be delayed so long. The decontamination squads had been ready; ready and waiting for fifteen years; ready to swoop down through the radio-active clouds and save what might be saved for the remnant of survivors.—In return, of course, for fair payment.

But fifteen times, the planet had revolved about its sun. During each revolution, the satellite had rotated thirteen times about the primary. And in all that time the nuclear war had not come.

Nuclear bombs were exploded by the large-primate intelligences at various points on the planet's surface. The planet's stratosphere had grown amazingly warm with radioactive refuse. But still no war.

Devi-en hoped ardently that he would be replaced. He was the fourth Captain-in-charge of this colonizing expedition (if it could still be called so after fifteen years of suspended animation) and he was quite content that there should be a fifth. Now that the home world was sending an Arch-administrator to make a personal survey of the situation, his re-

placement might come soon. Good!

He stood on the surface of the Moon, encased in his space-suit, and thought of home, of Hurria. His long, thin arms moved restlessly with the thought, as though aching (through millions of years of instinct) for the ancestral trees. He stood only three feet high. What could be seen of him through the glass-fronted head plate was a black and wrinkled face with the fleshy, mobile nose dead-centered. The little tuft of fine beard was a pure white in contrast. In the rear of the suit, just below center was the bulge within which the short and stuffy Hurrian tail might rest comfortably.

Devi-en took his appearance for granted, of course, but was well aware of the difference between the Hurrians and all the other intelligences in the Galaxy. The Hurrians alone were so small; they alone were tailed; they alone were vegetarians;—they alone had escaped the inevitable nuclear war that had ruined every other known intelligent species.

He stood on the walled plain that extended for so many miles that the raised and circular rim (which on Hurria would have been called a crater, if it were smaller) was invisible beyond the horizon. Against the southern edge of the rim, where there was always some protection against the direct rays of the Sun, a city had grown. It had begun as a temporary camp, of course, but with the years, women had been brought in, and children had been born. Now there were schools and elaborate hydroponics establishments, large water reservoirs, all that went with a city on an airless world.

It was ridiculous! All because one planet had nuclear weapons and would not fight a nuclear war.

The Arch-administrator, who would be arriving soon, would undoubtedly ask, almost at once, the same question that Devi-en had asked himself a wearisome number of times.

Why had there not been a nuclear war?

Devi-en watched the hulking Mauvs preparing the ground now for the landing, smoothing

out the unevennesses and laying down the ceramic bed designed to absorb the hyper-atomic field-thrusts with minimum discomfort to the passengers within the ship.

Even in their space-suits, the Mauvs seemed to exude power, but it was the power of muscle only. Beyond them was the little figure of a Hurrian giving orders, and the docile Mauvs obeyed. Naturally.

The Mauvian race, of all the large-primate intelligences paid their fees in the most unusual coin, a quota of themselves, rather than of material goods. It was a surprisingly useful tribute, better than steel, aluminum or fine drugs in many ways.

Devi-en's receiver stuttered to life. "The ship is sighted, sir," came the report. "It will be landing within the hour."

"Very good," said Devi-en. Have my car made ready to take me to the ship as soon as landing is initiated."

He did not feel that it was very good at all.

THE Arch-administrator came flanked by a personal retinue of five Mauvs. They entered the city with him, two on each side, three following. They helped him off with his space-suit, then removed their own.

Their thinly-haired bodies, their large, coarse-featured faces, their broad noses and flat cheekbones were repulsive but not frightening. Though twice the height of the Hurrians and more than twice the breadth, there was a blankness about their eyes, something completely submissive about the way they stood, with their thick-sinewed necks slightly bent, their bulging arms hanging listlessly.

The Arch-administrator dismissed them and they trooped out. He did not really need their protection, of course, but his position required a retinue of five and that was that.

No business was discussed during the meal or during the almost endless ritual of welcome. At a time that might been more appropriate for sleeping, the Arch-administrator passed small fingers through his tuft of beard and said, "How much longer must

we wait for this planet, Captain?"

He was visibly advancing in age. The hair on his upper arms was grizzled and the tufts at the elbows were almost as white as his beard.

"I cannot say, your Height," said Devi-en, humbly. "They have not followed the path."

"That is obvious. The point is, *why* have they not followed the path? It is clear to the Council that your reports promise more than they deliver. You talk of theories, but you give no details. Now we are tired of all this back on Hurria. If you know of anything you have not told us, now is the time to talk of it."

"The matter, your Height, is hard to prove. We have had no experience of spying on a people over such an extended period. Until recently, we weren't watching for the right things. Each year we kept expecting the nuclear war the year after, and it is only in my time as Captain that we have taken to studying the people more intensively. It is at least one benefit of the long waiting time that we have learned some of their principle languages."

"Indeed? Without even landing on their planet?"

Devi-en explained. "A number of radio messages were recorded by those of our ships that penetrated the planetary atmosphere on observation missions, particularly in the early years. I set out linguistics computers to work on them and for the last year I have been attempting to make sense out of it all."

The Arch-administrator stared. His bearing was such that any outright exclamation of surprise would have been superfluous. "And have you learned anything of interest?"

"I may have, your Height, but what I have worked out is so strange and the underpinning of actual evidence is so uncertain that I dared not speak of it officially in my reports."

The Arch-administrator understood. He said, stiffly, "Would you object to explaining your views unofficially,—to me."

"I would be glad to," said Devi-en, at once. "The inhabitants of this planet are, of course, large-primate in nature.

And they are competitive."

The other blew out his breath in a kind of relief and passed his tongue quickly over his nose. "I had a queer notion," he muttered, "that they might *not* be competitive and that that might—But go on, go on."

"They *are* competitive." Devi-en assured him. "Much more so than one would expect on the average."

"Then why doesn't everything else follow?"

"Up to a point it does, your Height. After the usual long incubation period, they began to mechanize, and after that, the usual large-primate killings became truly destructive warfare. At the conclusion of the most recent large-scale war, nuclear weapons were developed and the war ended at once."

The Arch-administrator nodded. "And then?"

Devi-en said, "What should have happened was that a nuclear war ought to have begun shortly afterward and that in the course of the war, nuclear weapons would have developed quickly in destructiveness, have been used nevertheless in typical large-primate fashion, and have quickly reduced the population to starving remnants in a ruined world."

"Of course, but that didn't happen. Why not?"

Devi-en said, "There is one point. I believe these people, once mechanization started, developed at an unusually high rate."

"And if so?" said the other. "Does that matter? They reached nuclear weapons the more quickly."

"True. But after the most recent general war, they continued to develop nuclear weapons at an unusual rate. That't the trouble. The deadly potential has increased before the nuclear war had a chance to start and now it has reached a point where even large-primate intelligences dare not risk a war."

The Arch-administrator opened his small black eyes wide, "But that is impossible. I don't care how technically talented these creatures are. Military science advances rapidly only during a war."

"Perhaps that is not true in the case of these particular

creatures. But even if it were, it seems they *are* having a war; not a real war, but a war."

"Not a real war, but a war," repeated the Arch-administrator blankly. "What does that mean?"

"I'M not sure." Devi-en wiggled his nose in exasperation. "This is where my attempts to draw logic out of the scattered material we have picked up is least satisfactory. This planet has something called a Cold War. Whatever it is, it drives them furiously onward in research and yet it does not involve complete nuclear destruction."

The Arch-administrator said, "Impossible!"

Devi-en said, "There is the planet. Here we are. We have been waiting fifteen years."

The Arch-administrator's long arms came up and crossed over his head and down again to the opposite shoulders. "Then there *is* only one thing to do. The Council has considered the possibility that the planet may have achieved a stalemate, a kind of uneasy peace that balances just short of a nuclear war. Something of the sort you describe though no one suggested the actual reasons you advance. But it's something we can't allow."

"No, your Height?"

"No," he seemed almost in pain. "The longer the stalemate continues, the greater the possibility that large-primate individuals may discover the methods of interstellar travel. They will leak out into the Galaxy, in full competitive strength. You see?"

"Then?"

The Arch-administrator hunched his head deeper into his arms, as though not wishing to hear what he himself must say. His voice was a little muffled. "If they are balanced precariously, we must push them a little, Captain. We must push them."

Devi-en's stomach churned and he suddenly tasted his dinner once more in the back of his throat. "Push them, your Height?" He didn't want to understand.

But the Arch-administrator put it bluntly, "We must help them start their nuclear war." He looked as miserably sick as

Devi-en felt. He whispered, "We must!"

Devi-en could scarcely speak. He said, in a whisper, "But how could such a thing be done, your Height?"

"I don't know how. —And do not look at *me* so. It is not my decision. It is the decision of the Council. Surely you understand what would happen to the Galaxy if a large-primate intelligence were to enter space in full strength without having been tamed by nuclear war."

Devi-en shuddered at the thought. All that competitiveness loosed on the Galaxy. He persisted, though. "But *how* does one start a nuclear war? How is it done?"

"I don't know, I tell you. But there must be some way; perhaps a—a message we might send or a—a crucial rainstorm we might start by cloud-seeding. We could manage a great deal with their weather conditions—"

"How would that start a nuclear war?" said Devi-en, unimpressed.

"Maybe It wouldn't. I mention such a thing only as a possible example. But large-primates would know. After all, they are the ones who *do* start nuclear wars in actual fact. It is in their brain-pattern to know. That is the decision the Council came to."

Devi-en felt the soft noise his tail made as it thumped slowly against the chair. He tried to stop it and failed. "What decision, your Height?"

"To trap a large-primate from the planet's surface. To kidnap one."

"A *wild* one?"

"It's the only kind that exists at the moment on the planet. Of course, a wild one."

"And what do you expect him to tell us?"

"That doesn't matter, Captain. As long as he says enough about anything, mentalic analysis will give us the answer."

Devi-en withdrew his head as far as he could into the space between his shoulder-blades. The skin just under his arm-pits quivered with repulsion. A wild large-primate being! He tried to picture one, untouched by the stunning aftermath of nuclear war, unaltered by the civilizing influence of Hurrian eugenic breeding.

The Arch-administrator made no attempt to hide the fact that he shared the repulsion, but he said, "You will have to lead the trapping expedition, Captain. It is for the good of the Galaxy."

DEVI-EN had seen the planet a number of times before, but each time a ship swung about the Moon and placed the world in his line of sight, a wave of unbearable homesickness swept him.

It was a beautiful planet, so like Hurria itself in dimensions and characteristics but wilder and grander. The sight of it, after the desolation of the Moon, was like a blow.

How many other planets like it were on Hurrian master listings at this moment, he wondered. How many other planets were there concerning which meticulous observers had reported seasonal changes in appearance that could be interpreted only as being caused by artificial cultivation of food plants? How many times in the future would a day come when the radioactivity in the stratosphere of one of these planets would begin to climb; when colonizing squadrons would have to be sent out at once.

—As they were to this planet.

It was almost pathetic, the confidence with which the Hurrians had proceeded at first. Devi-en could have laughed as he read through those initial reports, if he weren't trapped in this project himself now. The Hurrian scout ships had moved close to gather geographical information, to locate population centers. They were sighted, of course, but what did it matter? Any time, now, they thought, the final explosion.

Any time— But useless years had passed and the scoutships wondered if they ought not to be cautious. They moved back.

Devi-en's ship was cautious now. All the crew was on edge because of the unpleasantness of the mission; not all Devi-en's assurances that there was no harm intended to the large-primate could quite calm them. Even so, they could not hurry matters. It had to be over a fairly deserted and uncultivated tract of uneven ground that they hovered. They stayed at

a height of ten miles for days, while the crew became edgier and only the ever-stolid Mauvs maintained calm.

Then the 'scope showed them a creature, alone on the uneven ground, a long staff in one hand, a pack across the upper portion of his back.

They lowered silently, supersonically. Devi-en himself, skin crawling, was at the controls.

The creature was heard to say two definite things before he was taken, and they were the first comments recorded for use in mentalic computing.

The first, when the large-primate caught sight of the ship almost upon him, was picked up by the direction telemike. It was "My God! A flying saucer!"

Devi-en understood the first phrase. That was a term for the Hurrian ships that had grown common among the large-primates those first careless years.

The second remark was made when the wild creature was brought in to the ship, *struggling* with amazing strength, but helpless in the iron grip of the unperturbed Mauvs.

Devi-en, panting, with his fleshy nose quivering slightly, advanced to receive him and the creature (whose unpleasantly hairless face had become oily with some sort of fluid secretion) yelled, "Holy Toledo, a *monkey!*"

Again, Devi-en understood the second part. It was the word for little-primate in one of the chief languages of the planet.

THE wild creature was almost impossible to handle. He required infinite patience, before he could be spoken to reasonably. At first, there were nothing but a series of crises. The creature realized almost at once that he was being taken off Earth and what Devi-en thought might prove an exciting experience for him, proved nothing of the sort. He talked instead of his offspring and of a large-primate female.

(They have wives and children thought Devi-en, compassionately, and, in their way, loved them, for all they were large-primate.)

Then he had to be made to understand that the Mauvs who kept him under guard and

who restrained him when his violence made that necessary would not hurt him. That he was not to be damaged in any way.

(Devi-en was sickened at the thought that one intelligent being might be damaged by another. It was very difficult to discuss the subject, even if only to admit the possibility long enough to deny it. The creature from the planet treated the very hesitation with great suspicion. It was the way the large-primates were.)

On the fifth day, when out of sheer exhaustion, perhaps, the creature remained quiet over a fairly extended period, they talked in Devi-en's private quarters and suddenly he grew angry again when the Hurrian first explained, matter-of-factly, that they were waiting for a nuclear war.

"Waiting!" cried the creature. "What makes you so sure there will be one?"

Devi-en wasn't sure, of course, but he said, "There is always a nuclear war. It is our purpose to help you afterward."

"Help us *afterward*." His words grew incoherent. He waved his arms violently and the Mauvs who flanked him had to restrain him gently once again and lead him away.

Devi-en sighed. The creature's remarks were building in quantity and perhaps mentalics could do something with them. His own unaided mind could make nothing of it.

And meanwhile the creature was not thriving. His body was almost completely hairless, a fact that long-distance observation had not revealed owing to the artificial skins worn by them. This was either for warmth or because of an instinctive repulsion on the part even of these particular large-primates themselves for hairless skin. (it might be an interesting subject to take up. Mentalics computation could make as much out of one set of remarks as another.)

Strangely enough, the creature's face had begun to sprout hair; more in fact than the Hurrian face had, and of a dark color.

But still, the central fact was that he was not thriving. He had grown thinner because he

was eating poorly and if he was kept too long, his health might suffer. Devi-en had no wish to feel responsible for that.

ON the next day, the large-primate seemed quite calm. He talked almost eagerly, bringing the subject around to nuclear warfare almost at once. (It had a terrible attraction for the large-primate mind, Devi-en thought.)

The creature said, "You said nuclear wars always happen. Does that mean there are other people than yours and mine —and theirs." He indicated the near-by Mauvs.

"There are thousands of intelligent s p e c i e s, living on thousands of worlds. Many thousands." said Devi-en.

"And they all have nuclear wars?"

"All who have reached a certain stage of technology. All but us. We were different. We lacked competitiveness. We had the cooperative instinct."

"You mean you know that nuclear wars will happen and you do nothing about it?"

"We *do,*" said Devi-en, pained. "Of course, we do. We try to help. In the early history of my people, when we first developed space-travel, we did not understand large-primates. They repelled our attempts at friendship and we stopped trying. Then we found worlds in radioactive ruins. Finally, we found one world actually in the process of a nuclear war. We were horrified but could do nothing. Slowly, we learned. We are ready, now, at every world we discover to be at the nuclear stage. We are ready with decontamination equipment and eugenic analyzers."

"What are eugenic analyzers?"

Devi-en had manufactured the phrase by analogy with what he knew of the wild one's language. Now he said, carefully, "We direct matings and sterilizations to remove, as far as possible, the competitive element in the remnant of the survivors."

For a moment, he thought the creature would grow violent again.

Instead, the other said in a monotone. "You make them docile, you mean, like these things?" Once again he indicated the Mauvs.

"No. No. These are differ-

ent. We simply make it possible for the remnants to be content with a peaceful, non-expanding, non-aggressive society under our guidance. Without this, they destroyed themselves, you see and without it, they would destroy themselves again."

"What do you get out of it?"

Devi-en stared at the creature dubiously. Was it really necessary to explain the basic pleasure of life? He said, "Don't you enjoy helping someone?"

"Come on. Besides that. What's in it for you?"

"Of course, there are contributions to Hurria."

"Ha."

"Payment for saving a species is only fair," protested Devi-en, "and there are expenses to be covered. The contribution is not much and is adjusted to the nature of the world. It may be an annual supply of wood from a forested world; manganese salts from another. The world of these Mauvs is poor in physical resources and they themselves offered to supply us with a number of individuals to use as personal assistants. They are extremely powerful even for large-primates and we treat them painlessly with anti-cerebral drugs—"

"To make zombies out of them!"

Devi-en guessed at the meaning of the noun and said, indignantly, "Not at all. Merely to make them content with their role as personal servant and forgetful of their homes. We would not want them to be unhappy. They are intelligent beings!"

"And what would you do with Earth, if we nad a war?"

"We have had fifteen years to decide that," said Devi-en. "Your world is very rich in iron and has developed a fine steel technology. Steel, I think, would be your contribution." He sighed, "But the contribution would not make up for our expense in this case, I think. We have over-waited now by ten years at least."

The large-primate said, "How many races do you tax in this way?"

"I do not know the exact number. Certainly, more than a thousand."

"Then you're the little landlords of the Galaxy, are you? A thousand worlds destroy themselves in order to contribute to your welfare. You're something else, too, you know." The wild one's voice was rising, growing shrill. "You're vultures."

"Vultures?" said Devi-en, trying to place the word.

"Carrion-eaters. Birds that wait for some poor creature to die of thirst in the desert and then come down to eat the body."

Devi-en felt himself turn faint and sick at the picture conjured up for him. He said, weakly, "No, no, we *help* the species."

"You wait for the war to happen like vultures. If you want to help, *prevent* the war. Don't save the remnants. Save them all."

Dev-en's tail twitched with sudden excitement. "How do we prevent a war? Will you tell me that?" (What was prevention of war but the reverse of bringing about a war. Learn one process and surely the other would be obvious.)

But the wild one faltered. He said, finally, "Get down there. Explain the situation."

Devi-en felt keen disappointment. That didn't help. Besides—He said, "Land among you? Quite impossible." His skin quivered in half a dozen places at the thought of mingling with the wild ones in their untamed billions.

Perhaps the sick look on Devi-en's face was so pronounced and unmistakeable that the wild one could recognize it for what it was even across the barrier of species. He tried to fling himself at the Hurrian and had to be caught virtually in mid-air by one of the Mauvs, who held him immobile with an effortless constriction of biceps.

The wild one screamed. "No. Just sit here and wait! Vulture! Vulture! *Vulture!*"

IT was days before Devi-en could bring himself to see the wild one again. He was almost brought to disrespect of the Arch-administrator when the analysis of the mental makeup of these wild ones.

Devi-en said, boldly, "Surely there is enough to give some solution to our question."

The Arch-administrator's nose quivered and his pink tongue passed over it meditatively. "A solution of a kind, perhaps. I can't trust this solution. We are facing a very unusual species. We know that already. We can't afford to make mistakes.—One thing, at least. We have happened upon a highly intelligent one. Unless, —unless he is at his race's norm." The Arch-administrator seemed upset at that thought.

Devi-en said, "The creature brought up the horrible picture of that—that bird,—that—"

"Vulture," said the Arch-administrator.

"It put our entire mission into such a distorted light. I have not been able to eat properly since, or sleep. In fact, I am afraid I will have to ask to be relieved—"

"Not before we have completed what we have set out to do," said the Arch-administrator firmly. "Do you think I enjoy the picture of—of carrion-eat— You *must* collect more data."

Devi-en nodded, finally. He understood, of course. The Arch-administrator was no more anxious to cause a nuclear war than any Hurrian would be. He was putting off the moment of decision as long as possible.

Devi-en steeled himself for one more interview with the wild one. It turned out to be a completely unbearable one, and the last.

THE wild one had a bruise across his cheek as though he had been resisting the Mauvs again. In fact, it was certain he had. He had done so numerous times before and the Mauvs, despite their most earnest attempts to do no harm, could not help but bruise him on occasion. One would expect the wild one to see how intensely they tried not to hurt him and to quiet his behavior as a result. Instead, it was as though the conviction of safety spurred him on to additional resistance.

(These large-primate species were vicious, vicious, thought Devi-en sadly.)

For over an hour, the interview hovered over useless small talk and then the wild one said with sudden belligerence. "How long did you say you things

have been here?"

"Fifteen of your years," said Devi-en.

"That figures. The first flying saucers were sighted just after World War II. How much longer before the nuclear war?"

With automatic truth, Devi-en said, "We wish we knew," and stopped suddenly.

The wild one said, "I thought nuclear war was inevitable. Last time you said you over-stayed ten years. You expected the war ten years ago, didn't you?"

Devi-en said, "I can't discuss this subject."

"No?" The wild one was screaming. "What are you going to do about it? How long will you wait? Why not nudge it a little? Don't just wait, vulture. Start one."

Devin-en jumped to his feet. "What are you saying?"

"Why else are you waiting, you dirty—" He choked on a completely incomprehensible expletive, then continued, breathlessly, "isn't that what vultures do when some poor miserable animal, or man, maybe is taking too long to die? They can't wait. They come swirling down and peck out his eyes. They wait till he's helpless and just hurry him along the last step."

Devi-en ordered him away quickly and retired to his sleeping-room, where he was sick for hours. Nor did he sleep then or that night? The word "vulture" screamed in his ears and that final picture danced before his eyes.

DEVI-EN said firmly, "Your Height, I can speak with the wild one no more. If you need still more data, I cannot help you."

The Arch-administrator looked haggard. "I know. This vulture business— Very difficult to take. Yet you notice the thought didn't affect him. Large-primates are immune to such things, hardened, calloused. It is part of their way of thinking. Horrible."

"I can get you no more data."

"It's all right. I understand. —Besides, each additional item only strengthens the preliminary answer; the answer I thought was only provisional; that I hoped earnestly was only

provisional." He buried his head in his grizzled arms. "We have a way to start their nuclear war for them."

"Oh? What need be done?"

"It is something very direct, very simple. It is something I could never have thought of. Nor you."

"What is it, your Height?" He felt an anticipatory dread.

"What keeps them at peace now is that neither of two nearly-equal sides dares take the responsibility of starting a war.

If one side did, however, the other—well, let's be blunt about it—would retaliate in full."

Devi-en nodded.

The Arch-administrator went on. "If a single nuclear bomb fell on the territory of either of the two sides, the victims would at once assume the other side had launched it. They would feel they could not wait for further attacks. Retaliation in full would follow within hours; the other side would retaliate in its turn. Within weeks it would be over."

"But how do we make one of them drop that first bomb."

"We don't, Captain. That is the point. We drop the first bomb ourselves."

"What?" Devi-en swayed.

"That is it. Compute a large-primate's mind and that answer thrusts itself at you."

"But how can we?"

"We assemble a bomb. That is easy enough. We send it down by ship and drop it over some inhabited locality—"

"Inhabited?"

The Arch-administrator looked away and said, uneasily, "The effect is lost otherwise."

"I see," said Devi-en. He was picturing vultures; he couldn't help it. He visualized them as large, scaled birds (like the small harmless flying creatures on Hurria, but immensely large), with rubber-skinned wings and long razor-bills, circling down, pecking at dying eyes.

His hands covered his eyes. He said, shakily, "Who will pilot the ship? Who will launch the bomb?"

The Arch-administrator's voice was no stronger than Devi-en's. "I don't know."

"I won't," said Devi-en. "I can't. There is no Hurrian who

can, at any price."

The Arch-administrator rocked back and forth miserably. "Perhaps the Mauvs could be given orders—"

"Who could give them such orders?"

The Arch-administrator sighed heavily. "I will call the Council. They may have all the data. Perhaps they will suggest something."

SO after a little over fifteen years, the Hurrians were dismantling their Base on the other side of the Moon.

Nothing had been accomplished. The large-primates of the planet had not had their nuclear war; they might never have.

And despite all the future horror that might bring, Devi-en was in an agony of happiness. There was no point in thinking of the future. For the present, he was getting away from this most horrible of horrible worlds.

He watched the Moon fall away and shrink to a spot of light, along with the planet, and the sun of the system itself till the whole thing was lost among the constellations.

It was only then that he could feel anything but relief. It was only then that he felt a first tiny twinge of it-might-have-been.

He said to the Arch-administrator. "It might all have been well if we had been more patient. They might yet have blundered into nuclear war."

The Arch-administrator said, "Somehow I doubt it. The mentalic analysis of—"

He stopped and Devi-en understood the wild one had been replaced on his planet with minimal harm. The events of the past weeks had been blanked out of his mind. He had been placed near a small, inhabited locality not far from the spot where he had been first found. His fellows would assume he had been lost. They would blame his loss of weight, his bruises, his amnesia upon the hardships he had undergone.

But the harm done *by* him—

If only they had not brought him up to the Moon in the first place. They might have reconciled themselves to the thought of starting a war. They might somehow have thought of drop-

ping a bomb;. and worked out some indirect, long-distance system for doing so.

It had been the wild one's word-picture of the vulture that had stopped it all. It had ruined Devi-en and the Arch-administrator. When all data was sent back to Hurria, the effect on the Council itself had been notable. The order to dismantle the Base had come quickly.

Devi-en said, "I will never take part in c o l o n i z a t i o n again."

The Arch-administrator said, mournfully, "None of us may ever have to. The wild ones of that planet will emerge and with large-primates and large-primate thinking loose in the Galaxy, it will mean the end of—of—".

Devi-en's nose twitched. The end of everything; of all the good Hurria had done in the Galaxy; all the good it might have continued to do in the future.

He said, "We ought to have dropped—" and did not finish.

What was the use of saying that? They c o u l d n ' t have dropped the bomb for all the Galaxy. If they could have, they would have been large-primate themselves in their manner of thinking, and there are worse things than merely the end of everything.

Devi-en thought of the vultures.

THE END

NUCLEAR NEWS

by STEVEN RORY

There seems to be a way to tame the hydrogen bomb and make it work to create power without an explosion. It could solve all our energy problems—without danger

British atomic scientists believe a "synthetic sun" can be created in the laboratory. The "sun," they say, would make use of the thermonuclear or hydrogen-bomb reaction. But instead of detonating an explosion, the energy of the reaction could be held down by magnetic forces and the power used for peaceful ends.

The theory concerns gas discharges, a method of fusing different kinds of hydrogen by use of a powerful electric current. The "synthetic sun" would give off a temperature between 5,000,000 and 50,000,000 degrees centrigrade. The sun is thought to burn at 10,000,000 degrees centrigrade.

Such a synthetic sun would be made by passing a current of about 1,700,000 amperes through a tube containing mixtures of the hydrogen isotopes tritium and deuterium. The current would create such powerful electromagnetic forces around the outside of the tube that the discharge would be squeezed into a narrow path. Thus the products of the fusion process would not be hurled outward but would be confined, forming a source of energy.

The British scientists believe that from a glowing mass of deuterium-tritium gas one cubic meter in size they could continuously extract a hundred megawatts of electrical power at a temperature of 10,000,000 degrees.

BROOMSTICK RIDE

by ROBERT BLOCH

illustrated by EMSH

Witches and warlocks on the strange, new planet! There had to be a reasonable, scientific explanation of this phenomena. — But was there any scientific explanation?

IT was close to midnight when they gathered at the crater. Night raised its head across the pitted plains and the twin moons opened their green eyes to stare down into the crater's depths.

The pit was deep and dark. Forbes crouched on the rim with his companions and his mind was full of *ds. Deep, dark, dank, dismal, dolorous.* Yes, he thesaurized, and also *dreary, deathly, damned* and *doomed.* To say nothing of *diabolical.*

Right now, crouching at the crater's edge, he mentally reviewed the work of Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth* was what he had in mind. *Macbeth* on the blasted heath. If this wasn't a blasted heath, then all his concepts were awry. A blasted heath at midnight, with two moons instead of one.

Just behind him in the darkness, the three technicians checked the controls of the recorder-units. Visio and audio extended full-range to cover 360° scan on a half-mile sweep, with a 20-20000 frequency. Fourteen lenses played upon the heath, the crater rim, and the crater depths.

"Picking up anything yet?" Forbes whispered.

"Not yet. But if anything happens— "The technicians tone implied, for himself and his companions, that nothing was expected to happen. They couldn't quite understand what they were doing on a blasted heath at midnight, setting up

their sensitive equipment to record emptiness and silence.

Forbes couldn't blame them. This was supposed to be just a routine field-trip.

"You'll check Pyris," the Director had told him. Cartography did a run on it, and Doyle will give you the details. The atmosphere, I understand, is positively Earthlike, and it's a Class I planet—one of the anthropomorphic cultures. Doyle places it at about 900 spans behind us, and there are even language similarities. We'll want audio and visio records of course and an element analysis. Just a preliminary survey in case we find mineralogical possibilities worth exploiting. Strictly a routine checkup."

And Doyle hadn't added much more. "Outside of the craters and vegetation you'd think you were on Earth—a thousand spans ago, of course. The natives wear clothes, they have a primitive government, a religious pattern complete with totem and taboo, everything. Better get a hypnolearn on the language."

Forbes took the hypnolearn, and that started him wondering. The language wasn't English, but there were odd similarities. And odd references—some of them so odd that Forbes spent the last week before departure checking Central Data files. He had covered all the available filmscannings from 1500 to 1700 Oldstyle.

The comparison between life on Pyris and life on Earth in post-feudal times proved surprisingly apt after Forbes landed. He had paid a formal call upon the Kal, or ruler, and sued for permission to "visit" the planet. Gifts and courtesies had been exchanged, and then Forbes had taken his technical crew into the desert to study life in the villages. A small force remained aboard the ship which landed close to the Kal's fortress.

For three days Forbes and his men had taken records of daily existance in the mines and the subterranean grottoes where all the food for the planet was grown. He reviewed his conversation with the "peasants"—that's what they'd be called on Oldstyle earth, and that's how he thought of them now.

He remembered the hints of curious beliefs which the work-

ers of Pyris held. They were afraid to dig in certain grottoes, they kept away from the pits after dark, and they whispered of certain things which meant nothing to the men in Forbes' crew.

But he had scanned the Old-style past on Earth, and that's how he'd run into Shakespeare, and similarities. The similarities excited him sufficiently to have his equipment set up in what he thought was the logical spot at the logical time. The blasted heath at midnight.

NOW Forbes crouched there and waited for what appears on blasted heaths.

It came.

Audio got it first, faint and far away. The rush of matter through atmosphere, and above it the shriller sounds, splintering the silence.

One of the technicians, Kalt, began to mutter. "Bedamned! Voices. Voices in the sky!"

Visio took over now. The delicate cameras were on target, automatically focussing and feeding out *infra* and *ultra* to record what human eyes could not as yet perceive. And then the distant objects came into the range of normal viewing.

"Look!" Kalt whispered to his companions. "Pyrans. Up there, in the sky. And what are they riding on?"

Forbes could have told him. Forbes could have told him what comes to blasted heaths at midnight, and what they rode upon. But he kept silent, rather than disturb them at their work.

A month ago he himself would not have been disturbed, but since then he'd done that filmscan. And now he knew about witches.

They rode on broomsticks to the Sabbat, swooped from the skies—witches and warlocks, wizards and sorceresses, coming in coven to adore Satan, the Black Master of the Flock.

Of, course, all this was ancient superstition, and earthly superstitions besides. It had no basis in reality.

But he was seeing it now.

The broomsticks — were those long shafts really broomsticks?—soared overhead and then descended into the crater. The riders (were those frowsy hags really witches?) cackled

and shrieked, their voices echoing below the crater rim.

Now fire blazed below, and the flames blazed blue as the crones cast powder upon the pyres. The hags were naked now, their anointed bodies shimmering in the smoke.

"Bedamned!" muttered Kalt again, like the sensible modern technician he was. Forbes reflected that the man didn't even know the meaning of the word he used. It was merely a common-place expression. Once it had been a jocular curse—"I'll be damned!" And before that, back in the ancient days of 1500-1700 Oldstyle, it had a literal meaning. It was, in those times, an acknowledgement of fact. People *were* damned. They *did* sell their souls to Satan. And they danced around fires and chanted while the smoke swirled. The damned danced.

They were dancing now.

Forbes recognized the ritual from what he'd scanned. He knew about the unguent cast on the fire, the ointment on the naked bodies, about belladonna and aconite and other forgotten drugs.

He knew about the rituals they chanted in the Pyric tongue. Of course they could not be adoring Satan—he'd go over the audio records very thoroughly in the future—but at the moment he thought he could detect repeated shouts of a word resembling "Sire".

But everything else was familiar, dreadfully so. When the figure stepped out of the shadows, wearing a hood crowned with *kort*-horns, Forbes was reminded of the Master of the Sabbat, who wore the Sign of the Goat or the antlers of the Black Stag. Here it would be a *kort*, of course, for it was the only quadreped on Pyris.

THE Master of the Sabbat, whatever his Pyric title, was leading the chanting now. And he brought the *kort* into the firelight and he wielded the knife and filled the bowl and gave all to drink of the sacrifice. Then the smoke swirled up and the voices howled and—

The *temrars* came. Forbes recognized the soldiers of the Kal as they rose along the opposite rim of the crater. He recognized their breastplates,

their spears and swords and the two-man slings which hurled arrows of steel.

The arrows were speeding now, through the smoke. And the Kal's men clambered down the sides of the crater. The crones wailed.

Then came another shout—from behind.

Forbes turned, but too late. Another group of *temrars* had crept up in the darkness, to pinion the arms of his crew. And they used their swords now—not on the men, but on the receptors and the equipment. In a moment, audio and visio were wreckage.

The tall, spade-bearded leader confronted Forbes, placed his hand on his heart in salute, and murmered, "You are to follow me. It is the wish of the Kal."

Forbes heard Kalt protesting, and cut him off with a curt gesture. He remembered that he was the guest of an alien culture and a primitive one. They had already destroyed his records and they were perfectly capable of destroying him, just as they would probably destroy the witches in the pit below. "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.' Wasn't that an old biblical injunction? Strange, that there should be this similarity.

And there were more similarities to come, as Forbes and his companions were escorted, on *kort*-back, across the nighted plain. Forbes could close his eyes and easily imagine himself transported across space and time to ancient Earth. The clank of armor, the thud of hoofbeats, the remorseless tread of the iron legions returning victorious to the castle of the king—all were part of another world. A world of conquerors and commoners, of mage and magic.

Forbes couldn't repress an ironic grin. He, the selfstyled representative of modern intergalactic culture, was a prisoner of these superstitious savages. A single sweep of a sword had shattered the finest and most delicate scientific recording instruments yet devised. This wasn't his world—it was a world of force and cunning and he'd do best to deal with it on those terms.

Perhaps he'd treated the Kal

too lightly. Certainly the Pyric people feared their ruler. They gave him their toil, their allegience, their taxes and their daughters. He owned the mines and the grottoes and was worshipped like a god.

So perhaps those who opposed the Kal would find new gods to worship. Sire, or whatever he was called, would be more than a Devil. He'd be Kal's chief political opponent. No wonder his soldiers sought the witches out.

THEY came to the valley and the citadel of the Kal. Rising within the walls of stone was the great fortress, its silhouette serrated against the sky. The company made its way through narrow streets to broader avenues, down the ramps and into the castle proper.

And here, in one of the stone antechambers, Forbes found Siddons, the ship's astrogator, and the other members of the crew.

"They came for us an hour ago," Siddons said. "No, they didn't try to force their way inside—locks were closed, anyhow. But they summoned, and we didn't resist. There's a guard around the ship now, but none of them went in, or even tried to enter. I don't understand it."

Forbes mustered a show of confidence. "We'll find out all about it when I see the Kal."

"The Kal will see you now." It was the spade-bearded *temrar* who spoke, who led Forbes away alone and gestured to the others to keep back.

Forbes followed him down a long corridor, then halted as the *temrar* indicated a small door. "Please to enter," he said.

Nodding, Forbes opened the door, stepped inside, and faced the Kal.

The hairy little fat man was seated behind a large table. His pudgy hands rested on the table-top and cradled a silver shape.

He tucked it away in the folds of his sleeve as Forbes entered and nodded at him gravely.

"I had you brought here for your own protection," the Kal said. "Your lives are in danger."

"From what?"

"The *wrali*. Or, as you would call them, witches."

"Why s h o u l d they harm us?"

"Because you threaten their way of life. And unless you leave, they will destroy you. That was the purpose of their rites this evening—to summon Sire, the Evil One."

Forbes smiled. "But that's superstition," he said. "They can't harm us with spells or enchantments. S u r e l y you don't believe, for example, that a witch or one of your *wrali* can kill a man by sticking pins into his image or melting it over a hot fire. Or do you?"

The Kal's v o i c e, like his face, was inscrutable. "It is not a question of what I believe. It is a question of what my people believe. And is it not true that once there were men who believed in witchcraft on Earth?"

"True." Forbes hesitated. "But how would *you* know that?"

"Because the *wrali* have a legend. According to that legend, the inhabitants of Pyris come originally from Earth."

"Our Earth?"

"Exactly. Haven't you noticed the similarities in language, in concept, in the system of government corresponding to olden days? And isn't our *wrali*-worship of Sire similar to the witch-worship of Satan?"

The Kal smiled now. "I'm not the ignorant barbarian you think me to be—it is only through choice that I appear so. And you might do well to ponder our legend.

"The tale is this. Long ago, on your Earth, witches were persecuted, burned, hanged, torn to pieces, because they believed in Satan, or Sire. And a certain group, facing extinction on your planet, invoked the Evil One to save them. He granted their desires. They mounted their broomsticks and flew into space—flew here, to Pyris."

Forbes blinked. "You don't believe that, do you?" he asked.

"L e g e n d s are interesting, you must admit. They do offer explanations."

"I have another." Forbes considered for a moment. "On our Earth, long ago, science was as suspect as witchcraft. Scientists performing experiments or investigations could be accused of black magic and executed just as witches were.

"Now suppose a certain man, or group of men, working in secret, managed somehow to hit upon the principles of atomic propulsion and space-travel —just as we know the alchemists investigated atomic theory? And in order to escape from a hostile environment, they actually built a ship and came here? Whereupon a clique of warriors among their descendants determined to seize the power of government, gradually debased the people and enslaved them—planting such crude legends to keep them in the grip of superstition?"

The Kal shrugged. "You find that theory more attractive than witchcraft, eh?"

Forbes met his gaze. "It's logical. Somewhere in this world the sources of scientific knowledge must still exist, suppressed only to maintain the present rulers in control. I rather suspect that the *wrali* understand some of it. I saw them ride to the meeting tonight on broomsticks, and I'm thinking now that those broomsticks contained individual power-packs."

The Kal shrugged again. "I see there are no secrets to the trained scientific mind. But now that you know the story, I must ask you to leave, for your own safety. The *wrali* fear you and may take drastic measures."

Forbes bowed his head. "Very well. We can take off immediatly, if you release us."

"You will be escorted to your ship. Is there anything you need, any service you require?"

"No, thank you." Forbes hesitated. "It's just that I'm sorry. Sorry to see a world still existing in such savagery as yours, when it isn't necessary. That men here are still ruled by ignorance and superstition."

The Kal tugged at his beard. "But suppose there were truth to the legends? Suppose

that Sire, or Satan does rule here and that science dares not oppose magic? That this world stays in barbarism because it is the Evil One's wish to rule, and that science must bow before sorcery lest everything be destroyed?"

Forbes smiled. "You know that's nonsense," he replied. "I can't accept that, any more than you can."

"Yet you'll go now and leave us to our savagery?"

"I have no choice."

"Very well, then." The Kal inclined his head. Forbes went to the door and the Kal spoke to his *temrar*, gave orders for safe escort back to the ship.

THE door closed, and the Kal was alone in the little room. He stared into the flame from the brazier, then extracted the gleaming object from his sleeve once more. He turned it over and over with his pudgy hands and after he had examined it quite thoroughly he merely sat and waited.

After a time the door opened again. A Pyran came in, wearing a hood crowned with *kort*-horns.

"They are gone?" asked the Kal.

"Back to the ship. Soon they depart."

"I am sorry about tonight," the Kal said. "I trust the *temrars* did not actually hurt anyone, but they had to make it convincing. If Earth ever suspected that the government and the *wrali* work together, then nothing could stop them from returning. As it is, I think we deceived them and they are gone for good."

The hooded one stood stock-still and his head was cocked as though he were listening. "I can sense them now," he murmured. I can reach the one called Forbes, on the ship. He is thinking of his report. He will put in a request for an expedition to come back here. He wants to bring a new government from his planet and civilize all Pyris." The hooded one sighed. "It is as I told you it would be. Your plan has failed."

The Kal rose. "I'm sorry," he said. "I tried to save them. First I told him the truth

about how we came to Pyris, and about the power of magic. But he didn't believe me. He preferred to think it was all science, disguised as legend."

"Then it must be ended my way," the hooded one declared. "We work together, *wrali* and *temrar,* although the people do not know. We work together to keep this planet in ignorance, keep our race from civilization and s c i e n c e—because with science, worship of the Evil One would cease. And that was the ancient promise we made when we came here—that our people would always worship. We must keep that promise in order to survive.

"So we c a n n o t let this Forbes come back and bring his cursed science here. We must do things my way. Give that to me."

The Kal handed the silvery object to the hooded one. "Is it time?" he whispered.

The hooded one cocked his head again. "I can sense it now," he said. "The ship has taken off. It climbs swiftly. Thousands of miles."

The hooded one bent over the b r a z i e r as the flames roared up. C a r e f u l l y he thrust the silvery object into the crimson coals. The flames licked, tasted, then consumed with incredible speed. In a m o m e n t the object melted away.

"What happens now?" whispered the Kal.

The hooded one shuddered. "Ten thousand miles away," he murmured. "Now!"

Ten thousand miles over Pyris the space-ship exploded, melted into nothingness.

And down below the Kal murmured sadly, "We had to do it, didn't we? To save our planet from the scientists. Because they don't believe in the Power of Evil. They don't believe you can kill by sticking pins into an image—or by melting an image over a hot fire—"

THE END

LOOK TO THE STARS

by SCOTT NEVETS

An unconventional "eyeball" telescope has been designed which may push the frontiers of explored space back even further. Called the *Miami*—for Minimum Inertia and Mass Instrument—the proposed new telescope may be built for use in the National Science Foundation observatory to be erected in the Southwest.

It would be possible, using the new design, to build a 400-inch telescope at not much greater cost than the 200-inch Hale telescope at Palomar Mountain in California, currently the world's largest.

The startling-looking device differs from conventional models in its smaller overall size and in the absence of the conventional big tube. Replacing the big tube in the new design is a light but rigid support extending between the primary and secondary mirrors. The observer will sit in a ball-shaped housing attached to the back of the primary mirror, and the entire telescope would be round in appearance rather than the traditional tube.

A new instrument designed to make possible "seeing" through the vast clouds of interstellar dust that obscure the center of the Milky Way galaxy was described recently at a meeting of the American Optical Society. The device, known as an infra-red stellar photometer, is designed to pick up infra-red radiation with wave-lengths three to four times longer than those of visible light. The dust clouds that obscure the galaxy's center scatter the wave lengths of visible light, but not the longer wave lengths of infra-red radiations emanating from the galactic center.

THE HUNTERS OF CUTWOLD

by CALVIN M. KNOX

NOVELETTE *illustrated by* BOWMAN

The hunters wanted the supreme thrill of shooting the intelligent, man-like creatures without suffering the harsh punishment for murder. — This manhunt was legal

IT was morning on Cutwold, fifth planet of the Caveer system. And there would be betrayal by nightfall, Brannon knew. He knew it the way he knew the golden-green sun would rise, or the twin blank-faced moons. He knew it ahead of time, half-sensing it with the shadowy precognitory sense that made him so terribly valuable as a guide in the deadly forests of Cutwold.

He crouched in the sandy loam outside his cabin, staring down the yet-unpaven street, a lean tanned figure with thin sharp-curving lips and deepset sepia eyes that had seen too much of the galaxy and of men. He was waiting for the betrayal to begin.

He did not have to wait long.

The morning had started like all the others: at dawn Caveer broke through the haze, showering its eight worlds with golden-green brightness, and moments later on Cutwold the dawnbirds set up their keening icy shriek as

if in antiphonal response. Brannon always rose when the dawnbirds' cry was heard; his day began and ended early.

It was eleven years since he had drifted to Cutwold when the money ran out. For eleven years he had led hunting parties through the vine-tangled Cutwold forests, keeping them from death by his strange foresight. He had made some friends in his eleven years on Cutwold, few of them human.

It was eleven days since he had last had any money. This was the off season for hunting. The tourists stayed away, amusing themselves on the pleasure-worlds of Winter V or losing themselves in dream-fantasy on the cloud-veiled planets in Procyon's system. And on Cutwold the guides grew thin, and lived off jungle vines and small animals if they had not saved any money.

Brannon had not saved. But when the dawnbirds woke him that morning, something in their shrill sound told him that before noon he would be offered work, if he wanted it... and if his conscience could let him accept.

He waited.

At quarter past ten, when hunger started to grab Brannon's vitals in a cold grasp, Murdoch came down the road. He paused for a moment where Brannon crouched, looking down at him, shading his eyes from the brightness of the sun.

"You're Kly Brannon, aren't you?"

"I am. Hello, Murdoch."

The other started. He was tall, taller even than Brannon, with shadows shading his craggy face. Strange suns had turned Murdoch's face a leathery brown, and his eyebrows were a solid thick worm above his dark eyes, meeting. He said, "How did you know my name?"

"I guessed," Brannon said. He came slowly to his feet and met Murdoch's eyes, an inch or two above his own. He moistened his lips. "I don't want the job, Murdoch."

Somewhere in the thick jungle a scornful giant toad wheezed mockingly. Murdoch said, "I haven't said anything about any jobs yet."

"You will. I'm not interested."

Calmly, Murdoch drew a cigarette-pack from his waist-pouch. He tapped the side of the pack; the magnetic field sent a cigarette popping three-quarters of the way out of the little jeweled-metal box. "Have one?"

Brannon shook his head. "Thanks. No."

Murdoch took the extended cigarette himself, flicked the igniting capsule on its tip, and made an elaborate ceremony out of placing it in his mouth. He puffed. After a long moment he said, "There's ten thousand units cold cash in it for you, Brannon. That's the standard guide fee multiplied by ten. Let's go inside your shack and talk about it, shall we?"

Brannon led the way. The shack was dark and musty; it hadn't been cleaned in more than a week. Brannon's few possessions lay scattered about carelessly. He had left Dezjon VI in a hurry, eleven years before, leaving behind everything he owned save the clothes on his back. He hadn't bothered to accumulate any property since then; it was nothing but a weight around a man's neck.

He nudged the switch and the dangling solitary illuminator glowed luminously. Brannon sprawled down on an overstuffed pneumochair that had long since lost its buoyancy, and gestured for his vistor to take a chair.

"Okay," Brannon said finally. "What's the deal?"

MURDOCH waited a long moment before speaking. A gray cloud of cigarette smoke crept about his face, softening the angularity of his features. At length he said, "I have been told that a race calling themselves the Nurillins live on this planet. You know anything about them?"

Brannon flinched, even though his extra sense had warned him this was coming. His eyes slitted. "The Nurillins are out of my line. I only hunt animals."

Sighing, Murdoch said, "The Extraterrestrial Life Treaty of 2977 specifically designates one hundred eighty-six life forms as intelligent species and therefore not to be hunted, on pain of punishment. The

Treaty Supplement of 3011 lists sixty-one additional life forms which are prohibited to game hunters. I have both those lists with me. You won't find the Nurillins of Cutwold named anywhere on either."

Brannon shoved away the two brown paper-covered documents Murdoch held out to him. "I don't want to see the list. I know the Nurillins aren't on them. But that doesn't mean they aren't people. They ran away into the interior of the forest when humans settled on Cutwold. When the survey team made up the lists, they didn't have any Nurillins to judge by. Naturally they weren't included."

Murdoch nodded. "And thus they are free game to any hunters. I've brought a party of nine to Cutwold, Brannon. They're interested in hunting Nurillins. They say you're the only man on Cutwold who knows where the Nurillins are." Murdoch drew a thick bankroll from his pouch and held it by the tips of finger and thumb. "Ever see this much money before, Brannon?"

"Ten thousand? Not all in one lump. But it's too much. All you need to offer is thirty pieces of silver."

Murdoch whitened. "If that's the way you feel about this job, you—"

"The Nurillins are human beings," Brannon said tiredly. Sweat streamed down his body. "I happened to stumble over their hiding-place one day. I've gone back there a few times. They're my friends. Am I supposed to sell them for ten thousand units—or ten million?"

"Yes," Murdoch said. He extended the bankroll. "Until the Galactic Government declares them otherwise, they're fit and legitimate quarry for hunting parties, without fear of legal trouble. Well, my clients want to hunt them. And I happen to know both that you're the only man who can find them for us, and that you don't have a cent. What do you say?"

"No."

"Don't be stubborn, Brannon. I've brought nine people to Cutwold at my own expense. I don't get a cent back unless I deliver the goods. I could make it hard for you if you keep on refusing."

"I keep on refusing."

Murdoch shook his head and ran lean strong fingers through the blue-died matting of close-cropped hair that covered it. He looked peeved, more than angry. He jammed the bankroll into Brannon's uneager hand. "I want nine Nurillin heads—no more, no less. You're the man who can lead us to them. But let me warn you, Brannon: if we have to go out into that jungle ourselves, without you, and if we happen to come across your precious Nurillins ourselves, we're not just going to settle for nine heads. We'll wipe out the whole damned tribe of them. You know what a thermoton bomb can do to animals in a jungle?"

Brannon's mind had already pictured the fierce white brightness of the all-consuming flash. "I know," he said hoarsely. His eyes met Murdoch's: metal against metal. After a long silence Brannon said, "Okay. You win. Get your party together and I'll lead them."

NEWS travelled fast on Cutwold. It was noon by the time Brannon reached the main settlement, noon by the time he had rid his mind of the jangling discord of Murdoch's stony presence.

He came down the lonely road into the Terran settlement alone, and blankfaced men turned to look at him and looked away again, knowing he carried a hundred hundred-unit bills tucked carelessly in his hip pocket, and hating him for it. The road at noon was sun-baked and hot: squat diamond-backed reptiles with swollen heads hopped across the path, inches from Brannon's feet.

There were perhaps fifty thousand Terrans on Cutwold, located in six settlements scattered over the face of the planet. It was a warm and fertile planet, good mostly for farming and hunting, weak on minerals. Once there had been a few thousand Nurillins living where the Terrans now lived; remnants of a dying race, they had fled silently into the darkly warm depths of the forest when the first brawling Earthman arrived.

Kly Brannon had discovered the Nurillins. Everyone knew that. Whether it had been through some trick of his extra sense or by sheer blind luck, no one knew. But now everyone

also knew that Brannon had sold the Nurillins out to a hard-faced man named Murdoch for a roll of bills. They could see it in Brannon's eyes, as he came down out of the lonely glade where he had built his shack.

He was supposed to meet Murdoch and his nine nimrods at two-thirty. That left Brannon a couple of hours and a half yet to soak the bitterness out of himself. He stopped in VUORNIK'S BAR.

Vuornik himself was tending bar, a sour-eyed Terran with the pasty puffy flesh of a man who spent his time indoors. Seven or eight settlers were in the bar. They turned as Brannon kicked open the door, and swivelled their heads away again as they saw who it was.

"Morning, Vuornik. Long time no see."

The barkeep swabbed a clean place at the bar for Brannon and rumbled, "Nothing on the cuff today, Brannon. You know the rules here. I can't stretch your credit any."

"I didn't say a word about credit. Here, Vuornik. Suppose you give me a double khalla, straight, and honest change for this bill."

With elegant precision Brannon peeled a hundred off the roll Murdoch had given him, and laid it in the outstretched, grasping fleshy palm of the barkeep. Vuornik stared at the bill strangely, rubbing it between the folds of flesh at the base of his thumb. After a moment he poured Brannon a drink. Then he went to the till, drew forth a fifty, two twenties, a five, and four singles, shuffled them into a neat stack, and handed them to Brannon.

"You ain't got anything smaller than hundreds?" Vuornik asked.

"All I have is hundreds," said Brannon. "Ninety-nine of them plus change."

"So you took the job, then," Vuornik said.

Brannon shrugged. "You told me no more drinks on the cuff. A man gets thirsty without money, Vuornik."

He raised the mug and sipped some of the thin greenish liquor. It had a hard cutting edge to it that stung his throat and slammed into his stomach solidly. He winced, then drank again. The raw drink eased

some of the *other* pain—the pain of betrayal.

He thought of the gentle golden-skinned people of the forest, and wondered which nine of them would die beneath the blazing fury of hunters' guns.

A hand touched his shoulder. Brannon had anticipated it, but he hadn't moved. He turned, quite calmly, not at all surprised to find a knife six inches from his throat.

BARNEY Karris stood there, eyes bleared, face covered by two days' stubble. He looked wobbly, all of him but the hand that held the knife. That was straight, without a tremor.

"Hello, Barney," Brannon said evenly, staring at the knife. "How's the hunting been doing?"

"It's been doing lousy, and you know it. I know where you got all that cash from."

From behind the bar, Vuornik said, "Put that sticker away, Barney."

Karris ignored that. He said, "You sold out the Nurillins, didn't you? Murdoch was around; he talked to me. He got your address from me. But I didn't think you'd—"

Vuornik said, "Barney, I don't want any trouble in my bar. You want to fight with Brannon, you get the hell outside to do it. Put that knife out of sight or so help me I'll blast you down where you stand."

"Take it easy," Brannon murmured quietly. "There won't be any trouble." To Karris he said, "You want my money, Barney? That why you pulled the knife?"

"I wouldn't touch that filthy money! Judas! Judas!" Karris' red-rimmed eyes glared wildly. "You'd sell us all out! Aren't you human, Brannon?"

"Yes," Brannon said. "I am. That's why I took the money. If you were in my place you'd have taken it too, Barney."

Karris scowled and feinted with the knife, but Brannon's extra sense gave him ample warning. He ducked beneath the feint, pinwheeled, and shot his right arm up, nailing Karris in the armpit just where the fleshy part of the arm joined the body. Knuckles smashed into nerves; a current of numbness coursed down Karris' arm and the knife dropped clatter-

ingly to the floor.

Karris brought his left arm around in a wild desperate swipe. Brannon met the attack, edged off to the side, caught the arm, twisted it. Karris screamed. Brannon let go of him, spun him around, hit him along the cheekbone with the side of his hand. Karris started to sag. Brannon cracked another edgewise blow into the side of Karris' throat and he toppled. He landed heavily, like a vegetable sack.

Stooping, Brannon picked up the knife and jammed it three inches into the wood of the bar. He finished his drink in two big searing gulps.

The bar was very quiet. Vuornik was staring at him in terror, his pasty face dead white. The other eight men sat frozen where they were. Karris lay on the floor, not getting up, breathing harshly, stertorously, half-sobbing.

"Get this and get it straight," Brannon said, breaking the frigid silence. "I took Murdoch's job because I *had* to. You don't have to love me for it. But just keep your mouths shut when I'm around."

No one spoke. Brannon set his mug down with exaggerated care on the bar, stepped over the prostrate Karris, and headed for the door. As he started to push it open, Karris half-rose.

"You bastard," he said bitterly. "You Judas."

Brannon shrugged. "You heard what I said, Barney. Keep your mouth shut, and keep out of my way."

He shoved the door open and stepped outside. It was only twelve-thirty. He had two hours to kill yet before his appointment with Murdoch.

HE spent the two hours sitting on a windswept rock overlooking the wild valley of the Chalba River, letting the east wind rip warmly over his face, blowing with it the fertile smell of rotting vegetation and dead reptiles lying belly-upmost in tidal pools of the distant sea.

Finally he rose and made his way back toward civilization, back toward the built-up end of the settlement near the spaceport, where Murdoch was waiting for him.

When Brannon entered the hotel room, it was Murdoch's face he saw first. Then he saw the other nine. They were grouped in a loose semicircle staring toward the door, staring at Brannon as if he were some sort of wild alien form of life that had just burst into the room.

Murdoch said, "I want you all to meet Kly Brannon. He's going to be our guide. He's spent eleven years hunting on Cutwold—really k n o w s the place. Brannon, let me introduce you to the clients."

Brannon was introduced. He eyed each of them in turn.

There were four couples, one single man. All were Terrans. All looked wealthy, all looked bored. T y p i c a l tourist-type hunters, Brannon thought in weary contempt.

At the far left was Leopold Damon and his wife. Damon was fat and bald and looked to be on his second or third rejuvenation; his wife was about his age, puffy-eyed, ugly. They were probably tougher than they looked.

Next to them sat the Saul Marshalls. Marshall was a thin dried-out man with glittering eyes and a hooked ascetic nose. His wife was warmer-looking, a smiling brunette of thirty or so.

At their right was Clyde Llewellyn and his wife. Llewellyn was mild, diffident-looking, a slim red-haired man who seemed about as fierce as a bank clerk. His wife—Brannon blinked—his wife was a long, luxurious, cat-like creature with wide bare shoulders, long black hair, and magnificent breasts concealed only by sprayon patches the size of a one-unit coin.

The fourth couple consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Fredrik Rhawn, two sleek socialites, flawless of face and form, who seemed to have been turned out on a machine lathe. Next to them sat the loner, Rod Napoli, a burly, immensely broad man with thick features and gigantic hands.

"Mr. Napoli lost his wife on our previous tour," Murdoch said discreetly. "It—ah—explains the uneven number we have."

"I see," Brannon said. Napoli didn't seem particularly bereaved. He sat inhaling huge gulps of air at each breath, looking like a highly efficient

killing machine and nothing else.

"Well, now you've met everyone," said Murdoch. "I want you to know that this group is experienced in the ways of hunting, and that you're not just guiding a group of silly amateurs." His eyes narrowed. "Our goal, as you know, is the Nurillin."

"I know," Brannon returned acidly. "That's already been made clear."

"When would you like to start?" Murdoch asked.

"Now," said Brannon.

"Now?"

"Now?" said Fredrik Rhawn, half-rising. "So soon? But we just had lunch. I mean, couldn't we hold this thing over till tomorrow?"

"I'd like to get started," Brannon said stubbornly. He added silently, *the quicker the better. I want to get this thing over with.*

Rhawn's wife murmured something to him, and he said, "All right. It's foolish of me to hold everyone back, isn't it? We're ready to go any time."

"Good," Murdoch said. He glanced at Brannon. "Our equipment is packed and ready. We're at your disposal."

"Let's go, then," Brannon said.

BRANNON estimated privately that the trip would take two days of solid march. He had found the Nurillins after only little more than a day's journey out of the settlement, but that was when he had been alone and moving at a good pace.

They left the settlement single file at three-thirty that afernoon, Brannon in the lead, followed by Napoli, who lugged along the handtruck carrying their supplies and provisions, and then, in order, the Rhawns, the Damons, the Marshalls, and the Llewellyns, with Murdoch last of all, just back of radiant Marya Llewellyn.

Two days. As Brannon pushed on slowly through the thick forest, slashing down the clinging vines as he went, the thought of spending two days with these people was intolerable, the thought of the quest they were on impossible to carry in his mind. When he thought of the soft-voiced Nurillins and the few happy days

he had spent with them, and now realized that he was bringing nine trophy-happy tourists through the woods to their secret hiding place—

He shook his head. Behind him, Napoli said, "Something wrong?"

"Damned fly buzzing in my ears. They'll eat you alive if you let them."

Napoli c h u c k l e d. They moved on.

Brannon was sure the tourists knew what the Nurillins were. That just added an extra twist to it. Murder was punishable by life imprisonment, which in these days of hundred-fifty-year lifespans was ten times as dreadful as capital punishment. Since detection was almost unavoidable, people rarely murdered.

But *legal* murder—ah, that was another thing. All the thrill of destroying a thinking, breathing intelligent creature, with none of the drawbacks. In the early days of stellar expansion, the natives of a thousand worlds had been hewn down mercilessly by wealthy Terrans who regarded the strange life forms as "just animals."

To stop that, the Extraterrestrial Life Treaty of 2977 had been promulgated, and its supplement. From then on, none of the creatures listed could be shot for game. But there still were other worlds, newer worlds, worlds which had been missed in the survey. And races such as the Nurillins, with but a handful of members. The Nurillins had retreated when the Terrans came, and so they had been missed by the Treaty-makers.

And so they were still free game for the guns of Rod Napoli and Leopold Damon and anyone else willing to pay for t h e i r p l e a s u r e. Brannon scowled.

A vine tumbled down out of nowhere and slashed itself stickily across his face. He slashed it out of the way with his machete and pushed on.

He knew the forest well. His plan was to take the most circuitous route possible, in hopes that Murdoch would never be able to find his way to the Nurillins again. Accordingly he struck out between two vast cholla-trees, signalling for the others to follow him.

Suddenly M u r d o c h called

out, "Hold it up there, Brannon! Mrs. Damon wants to rest."

"But—"

"Hold it," Murdoch snapped. There was urgency in the hunt director's voice. Brannon stopped.

HE turned and saw Mrs. Damon sitting on a coarse-grained gray rock at the side of the footpath, massaging her feet. Brannon smiled and revised his estimate upward. It was going to take *three* days to get there, if this kept on happening with any regularity.

Murdoch said, "Brannon, could I see you for a minute as long as we've stopped?"

"Sure," Brannon said. "What is it?"

Murdoch had drawn away from the others somewhat and stood at a distance, with Marya Llewellyn. Her husband was paying no attention; he had joined the group that stood around Mrs. Damon. Brannon sauntered over to Murdoch.

"Are you taking us in the right direction?" Murdoch asked abruptly.

Surprised—for his foresight did not work all the time—Brannon glanced at Marya Llewellyn. The girl was staring at him out of dark pools of eyes, darker even than her jet hair. She wore only shorts and the sprayon patches over her breasts; she looked at him accusingly and said, "I don't think we're heading the right way."

"How would *you* know?" Brannon snapped.

Murdoch smiled coldly. "You're not the only one with heightened sensory powers, Brannon. Mrs. Llewellyn has a peculiar and very useful gift of knowing when she's going toward a goal and when she isn't. She says the route you just took doesn't feel right. She says it doesn't lead straight to the Nurillins."

"She's right," Brannon admitted. "What of it? I promised I'd get you there, and I will. Does it make any difference if I take a slightly roundabout route? *I'm* the guide, don't forget."

I haven't forgotten it. And I'll let you continue on this path another hour or so, provided we don't get any further off the course. But I thought I'd warn you that Marya here

will be able to detect it any time you try to fool us. Any time you deliberately try to get us lost, she'll tell me about it."

Brannon looked stonily at her. He said nothing.

"Losing your charges in the jungle is attempted murder," Murdoch went on. "I'd feel entirely justified in shooting you down if necessary."

Brannon's jaws tightened. "For the benefit of you and your little bloodhound here, I'm doing my best. I'll get you to the Nurillins. And if it's okay with Mrs. Damon, I'd like to get moving again right now."

AN hour later, they were still moving. Dark shadows were scudding across the sky now, and the forest was thickening into jungle—jungle where death might wait behind any tree or under any pebble. But still Brannon kept moving.

Knowing that Marya Llewellyn had some strange way of sensing direction didn't alter his plans any. He had intended from the first, whatever Murdoch's suspicions were, to lead the party sooner or later to the Nurillins. Brannon had been around; he never deluded himself with false hopes. Murdoch had hired him to lead them there, and Murdoch would not settle for less.

The nine tourists said little as they proceeded. They were lost in the strangeness of Cutwold.

Cutwold—or Caveer V, as the starcharts called it—was a warm, almost tropical world, heavily forested, heavily inhabited by life of all sorts. Once in its history it had spawned an intelligent species, the Nurillins. But they had been too gentle for Cutwold, and when Brannon had discovered them they were in the final throes before race extinction, with perhaps ten generations remaining to them if they kept out of man's way.

The forest was speaking, now. Crying abuse at the man who led ten others on a mission of murder.

The giant toads, those cynical toothy amphibians half the size of a man, were honking scornfully from either side of the path. Further back originated the deep moaning bellow

of the groundsnakes, and Brannon heard also the endless yipping of the little blue dogs that raged through the forest in murderous packs. He sensed nervousness spreading over his charges as night approached.

Above, Caveer, the golden-green sun that Brannon, in a forgotten past, had said was the loveliest he had ever seen, was dropping toward the horizon. Jonquil, first of the identical featureless moons of Cutwold, glimmered palely in the still-blue sky; Daffodil yet lay hidden in the nestling clouds of day, but soon would break forth and with its sister spiral across the night sky.

Then was the time of fear, in the forest—when the moons were bright.

Brannon plodded methodically forward through the darkening forest, dragging his ten charges along as if they were tied to his back. Somewhere ahead lay the refuge of th unsuspecting N u r i l l i n s; somewhere ahead lay a soft-eyed alien girl who had spoken kindly to him once long ago, and who now would receive her reward.

Karris' a c c u s i n g words burned his soul.

Judas. Judas.

It wasn't so, Brannon protested silently. It wasn't so. If they only could see *why* he was doing this—

They couldn't. To them he was a Judas, and Judas he would remain.

He stopped, suddenly. His jungle-sensitive ears, aided by the vague blur of a foresight in in his mind, picked up the *soun*d of feet drumming against forest soil. Hundreds of feet.

"What's the trouble?" Murdoch asked.

"Pack of wild dogs coming this way," said Brannon. "Let's pull into a tight circle and wait them out."

"No!" Mrs. Marshall gasped suddenly. "No!"

Her ascetic-faced husband turned to her, skin drawn so tight over his face he looked mummified. He slapped her, once; a white blotch appeared on her face, rapidly turning red. "Keep quiet," he said.

"That goes for all of you," Brannon. "They won't bother us if they have some other quarry. Stay still, try not to move—and if any of you lose your heads and fire into the

pack, you won't live to fire a second time."

He listened, tensely. First came the thump-*thump* of some large beast, then the pat-*pat*-pat of dogs, hundreds of them, in fierce pursuit.

"Here they come," Brannon said.

THE quarry came first, bursting out of the thick wall of vegetation that hemmed in the pathway on both sides. It was a Cutwold bull, eleven feet through the withers, a monster of atuarine with yellow curved horns two feet long jutting from its skull.

Now the bubbly slaver of fear covered its fierce jaws, and the thick black hide was slashed in a dozen places, blood oozing out steadily. The vanguard of the attacking force rode with the bull: two small blue dogs who clung to the animal's hind legs, snapping furiously, hoping to slice through the hamstring tendon and bring the bull crashing to the ground.

The pack is hungry tonight, Brannon thought.

He had only a moment's glimpse of the bull; then it was gone, blasting its way through the yielding underbrush, and only the sound of its snorting bleats of terror remained. But then came the pursuers.

Brannon had learned to fear the blue dogs of Cutwold more than the poison-trees or the velvet snakes or any of the other deadly jungle creatures he knew. The dogs were built low to the ground; they were whippet-like creatures whose claws could rend even the armor-thick leather of the giant bull, whose teeth bit the toughest meat, whose appetites never reached satiety. They burst into the clearing and streamed across the road so fast one dog appeared to melt into its successor, forming an unending lake of blue, a blur broken only by the glinting of their red eyes and snapping teeth.

Brannon remained quite still, standing with his group. The women were frozen, fearstruck; Napoli was staring at the dog horde with keen interest, but the other men appeared uneasy. Brannon counted minutes: *one, two, three...*

The numbers of dogs thinned until it was possible to see daylight between them. Off in the distance a cry of [illegible]-

tensity resounded: the bull had been brought to earth. Good, Brannon thought. The dogs would feed tonight, and for a while at least would keep away.

One last dog burst through the trampled brush. And paused.

And turned inquisitively, guided by who knew what mad impulse, to sniff at the clustered huddle of human beings standing silently in the jungle path.

It bared its teeth. It drew near. The rest of the pack was out of sight, almost inaudible. Suddenly Clyde Llewellyn lowered his heavy-cycle gun and sent three bullets smashing through the dog's body and skull, even as Brannon reached out to prevent it.

The dog fell. Savagely Brannon smashed Llewellyn to the ground with one backhanded swipe. "You idiot! Want to kill us all?"

The mildness vanished from the little man's face as he picked himself up. He started to go for his gun; Brannon tensed, but this time it was Murdoch who caught hold of Llewellyn. He shook him twice, slapped him.

"We've got to get moving now," Brannon said. "The dogs are blood-crazy tonight. They'll be back here any minute, as soon as the wind drifts the scent to them." He pointed up the road. "Go on! Start running, and don't stop!"

"What about you?" Murdoch asked.

"I'll back you up. Get going."

HE watched as they ran ahead. As they passed out of sight, Brannon lifted the dead dog and heaved it as far in the opposite direction as he could. The yipping grew louder; the pack was returning.

They came a moment later, muzzles coated with red, smelling new blood. Brannon crouched beside the thick trunk of a quaa-tree, waiting. The dogs paused in the clearing, sniffed the air, and, ignoring Brannon, set off toward their dead companion.

Brannon turned and ran up ahead, rejoining the others.

They were waiting for him.

"The dogs are off our trail," he said. He looked at the sullen-faced Llewellyn. A bruise was starting to swell on the side

of his face. "You're lucky I didn't shoot you down as you deserved," Brannon told him.

"Don't talk like that to my clients," said Murdoch.

"Your client nearly got us all killed. I specifically told you all to hold fire."

"I didn't like the looks of that dog," said Llewellyn. "He looked dangerous."

"One dog isn't half as dangerous as a pack. And one live dog won't draw a pack; a dead one will, when the blood gets into the air."

"Is the whole trip going to be like this?" Mrs. Rhawn asked suddenly. "Dangerous?"

Brannon took a deep breath before replying. "Mrs. Rhawn, you're on Cutwold to commit murder, whether you know it or not. The animals you're hunting are people, just like you and me. Murder is never easy. There's always danger. It's the price you pay for your sport."

Around the circle, faces whitened. Murdoch was taut with anger. Brannon looked inquisitively at him, but no reply was forthcoming.

Then he glanced upward. Both moons were high above, now, and the sun was barely visible, a lime-colored flicker hovering above the horizon, half intersected by the vaulting trees. It was getting late. It was almost time to make camp for the night.

"Let's move along," Brannon said. "It's getting late."

FOR half an hour more they hacked their way deeper into the jungle, until it was obviously too dark to travel further that day. Brannon marched at the head of the file, eyes keen for danger, ears listening, mind shrouded in black thoughts.

Behind him came the others. *Nine thrill-killers,* he thought. Nine allegedly civilized human beings who were spending fabulous sums for the privilege of gunning down other human beings coolly and conscienceless-ly.

It would be so easy, Brannon told himself, to lose these nine and their coordinator in the jungle—despite Marya Llewellyn. There were so many pitfalls to right and left of the main path: the carnivorous trees that waited, leaves quivering, for something meaty to trip their tropisms and plunge

into a network of catch-claws. The giant toads whose tongues could flick out and snarl themselves around a man's throat or waist in an unbreakable lariat's grip. All Brannon needed to do was lead them a short distance from the beaten path—

But that was the coward's solution. No, he told himself. He would bring them to their destination, for only that would fully serve his purpose.

Above, a nightbird squawked in the sky, calling, *"Keek! Keek! Keek!"*

On Cutwold day was heralded by the dawnbirds, night by the nightbirds. It was a system more efficient than clocks. Brannon said, "Okay. We stop here. Drop your packs and let's set up the shelter."

Under Murdoch's direction the plastic tent-bubble went up within minutes, puffing out of the extrusion panel carried for the purpose. Brannon patrolled the area, burning a wide swath around the camp with his flamer, as a signal to wildlife to stay away during the night. Unless they were ravenous, they would respect the singed circle of vegetation.

He left a fire outside the tent hatch that would last all night. Then he crawled inside. The others were already within their sleeping packs, though none were alseep. Brannon ventured a private guess that few of them would sleep soundly this night. The jungle was noisy—noisier, perhaps, for those with this sort of hunt in mind.

The Rhawns were talking in low whispers. Brannon caught Mrs. Rhawn saying, "...I don't think I trust that guide too much. He looks so strange, and *tense*."

Her husband glanced at Brannon, who was staring at the ground. "Hush! I think he can hear us."

Smiling, Brannon looked away. The others were gathering in for the night, trying to sleep. Brannon stepped outside, peered at the now almost entirely dark sky. The two moons hung overhead like two lanterns, casting shadows through the trees.

An animal was prowling outside the singed circle, sniffing the ground, staring strangely at the intruders who had broken the jungle peace.

He turned away and returned to the tent, found an un-

occupied corner, and slouched to the ground. He was thinking.

Thinking of a stubble-faced man in a bar who had cried *Judas* at him, and of ten thousand Galactic Currency Units that was his fee for this trip, and of a time three years before when he had gone off into the jungle on a solitary quest, and found—

The Nurillins.

IT had been a warm day in the twelfth month of Brannon's eighth year on Cutwold. He had been without work for three weeks, without money for two, and had gone on a foraging mission into the jungle.

At least foraging had been the ostensible reason. Actually he was searching—searching for something deeper than he could understand, out there. He needed to get away from the men of the settlement; that much he knew. So he struck out on his own, deep into the jungle.

The first day had been routine. He covered his usual quota of hiking miles, shot three small succulent birds and roasted them for his meal, dined on the sweet stems of kyril-shoots and the slightly bitter wine of the domran plant. At nightfall he camped and slept, and when the keening shriek of the dawnbirds woke him he rose and continued on, travelling unknowingly and uncaringly the same route that three years later he would cover with a party of wealthy killers.

Then he had had no idea where he was going. He put one foot before the other and forged on, pausing now and then to stare at some strange plant or to avoid some deadly little reptile or insect.

Somewhere on that second day, he ran into trouble.

It began with the *thrum-thrum* of a giant toad in a thicket of blueleaved shrubs. Brannon turned, reaching for his gun—and as he turned, a sudden thrumming came from the other side of the path, as well. He whirled—and found he was caught between two of the great squat amphibians!

He took two half-running steps before a sticky tongue lashed out and caught him round the middle. The thicket parted, and he saw his captor, vast mouth yawning, bulging

yellow eyes alight with anticipation. Brannon clawed desperately at the gummy pink ribbon that held him fast, but there was no escaping it. He dug his feet deep in the rich soil, braced himself—

The other toad appeared. And snared him as well.

He stood immobile, tugged in two directions at once, with two gaping toad-mouths waiting to receive him the moment the other yielded. The pressure round his middle was unbearable; he started to wish that one or the other would release him, so death would come.

But before death would come devouring. The victorious toad would digest him alive.

Then suddenly he heard a bright chirping sound, unlike any animal call he had ever known. There was a whistling in the underbrush and then a lithe golden form was at his side. Brannon's dark eyes were choked with tears of pain; he could barely see.

But the strange figure smiled at him and tapped each of the straining toads gently between the protruding eyes, and spoke three liquid alien words. And one toad, then the other, released him.

The tongues ripped away, taking with them clothing, skin, flesh. Brannon stood tottering for a moment, looking down at the red rawness of his waist, sucking in air to fill the lungs from which all air had been squeezed by the constricting tongues.

The alien girl—Brannon saw her as that now—gave one further command. The toads uttered thrums of disgust, turned, flopped heavily away into the darkness of the deeper jungle.

Brannon looked at the alien. "Thanks," he said. "Whoever —*whatever* you are."

And plunged forward, dropping heavily on his face in the warm jungle soil.

HE woke, later. When he could speak the language, he learned that it was four days later.

He was in a hut, somewhere. Golden alien figures moved about him. They were slim, humanoid in appearance, but hairless. Their skulls were bald shining domes of yellow; their eyes, dark green, were somehow sad.

Brannon looked down at himself. He was swathed in bandages where the tongues of the giant toads had ripped away the flesh. Someone bent above him, holding a cup to his lips.

He drank. It was broth, warm, nourishing. The girl who held it was the one who had rescued him in the forest. She smiled at him.

"Lethii," she said, pointing to herself.

Uncertainly Brannon touched his chest. "Brannon."

She repeated it. "Brannon." She grinned at him.

He grinned back.

That was the beginning.

He stayed there six weeks, among the Nurillins. He discovered that there were perhaps three thousand of them, no more; once, they had had great cities throughout Cutwold, but that had been many thousands of years before, and the jungle had long since reclaimed them.

The girl named Lethii was his guide. She nursed him to health, kept constant company with him when he was strong enough to walk, taught him the language. It was a smooth and flowing language, not difficult to learn.

"The toads are our steeds," she told him one day. "My people trained them long ago to respond to our commands. When I heard you screaming for help I was bewildered for I knew the toads never attacked any of us."

"I didn't know I was screaming," Brannon said.

"You were. The touch of a toad's tongue is agony. I heard your voice and saw you, and knew that the toads had attacked you because you were—not of us."

Brannon nodded. "And I never will be."

But at times during the weeks that passed he thought he *had* become one of them. He learned the Nurillin history—how they had been great once, and now were dying away, and how when the Terran scout ships had come the Nurillins had realized the planet was no longer theirs, and had moved off into the jungle to hide and wait for the end.

He felt himself growing a strange sort of love for the girl Lethii—not a sexual sort of love, for that was impossible

and even inconceivable between their species and his, but something else just as real. Brannon had never felt that sort of emotion before.

He met others, and came to know them—Darhuing, master of the curious Nurillin musical instruments; Vroyain, whose subtle and complex poetry bewildered and troubled Brannon. Mirchod, the hunter, who showed Brannon many ways of the jungle he had not known before.

But Brannon sensed strain in the village, finally, when he knew the people well enough to understand them. And so when six weeks had passed he said to Lethii, "I'm well now. I'll have to rejoin my people."

"Will you come back?"

"Yes," he said. "I'll come back."

HE came back twice more—once half a year later, once a year after that. They had welcomed him gladly, had grieved at his leave-taking.

Now a year and a half had slipped by since the last visit, and Brannon was returning once again. But this time he was bringing death.

Above the tent a bird shrieked, the long low wail of a dawnbird, and Brannon realized night had gone. He had dreamed of the Nurillins. He had remembered the three visits past, the visits now to be blotted out by bloodshed.

He got to his feet and stood looking down at the ten sleepers.

It was possible to kill them all, one by one, as they slept. No one would find them. Brannon would return alone, and no one would question him. The Nurillins would remain untroubled where they dwelt.

He shook his head.

His decision had been made; he would abide by it. He nudged Murdoch. The dark-faced man blinked and was awake in an instant, staring up at Brannon.

"Time to get up," Brannon said. "It's dawn. You can't sleep all day."

Murdoch got to his feet, nodding. "Time to get up," he repeated loudly. "Everybody up!"

The hunters awoke, grumbling and complaining.

"Will we reach the Nurillins today, Mr. Brannon?" asked

Saul Marshall's wife. "I'm stiff all over from sleeping on the ground."

"Did you sleep?" said Mrs. Damon. "I couldn't. I was up every moment of the night. Those birds, and the animals I kept hearing—!"

"Yes," said Rhawn's wife. "I hope we'll get there today. Another night sleeping out would really be too much."

Brannon very carefully erased the scowl of contempt before it had fully formed on his face. He said, "There's a very good chance we may get there before nightfall tonight. If all of you hurry up, that is. We're not getting any closer while we sit around in camp."

It was a telling point. Breakfast was perfunctory, just a handful of food-tabs and a once-over with a molecular rinse. Within an hour the camp had been broken up, the plastic tent dissolved, the equipment repacked and re-shouldered.

While Brannon waited for the Damons and the Rhawns to ready themselves for the day's march, he walked over to Murdoch, who was talking with Marya Llewellyn.

She looked incredibly fresh and lovely, as if she had slept in a germicidal incubator all night rather than in a jungle tent. Her skimpy clothes were barely creased.

"Well?" Brannon asked. "Am I taking you the right way?"

Murdoch glared at him. "We trust you, Brannon. You don't have to act this way about it."

"You trust me? You didn't yesterday."

"Marya says you're leading us toward the Nurillins. Well, you ought to be. We're paying you enough."

Brannon glanced at Marya Llewellyn. "Are you from Earth, Mrs. Llewellyn?"

"Originally. I live on Vega VII now."

That explained the deep tan, the air of health. "Have you done much hunting before?" Brannon asked.

"Mrs. Llewellyn has been on four hunting tours of mine," Murdoch said. "In fact, she met her husband on a tour. We were hunting in the Djibnar system then." He grinned at her, and she returned the grin. Brannon wondered whether any sort of relationship existed

between these two besides that of hunter and hunt director. Probably, he thought. Not that it mattered any to him.

"We're ready," Mrs. Damon called cheerily.

Brannon turned. She was plump, good-natured looking. A grandmotherly type. Out here, hunting intelligent beings? He shrugged. Strange kill-lusts lay beneath placid exteriors; he had found that out long before. He wondered how much these people were paying Murdoch for the privilege of committing legal murder. Thousands, probably.

Brannon surveyed the group of them. Only big Napoli was a familiar type: he was a legitimate sportsman, as could be seen by the way he handled his gear and himself in the jungle. As for the rest of them, these hunters, they were a cross-section—but they all shared one characteristic. All had a curious intent glint in their eyes. The glint of killers. The glint of people who had come halfway across the galaxy to cleanse their minds and souls by emptying the chambers of their guns into the innocent golden bodies of the Nurillins.

He moistened his lips. "Let's go," he said crisply. "There's a lot of hiking yet ahead."

THERE wasn't much doubt in Brannon's mind that he would reach the Nurillins' village safely with his ten charges. The half-comprehended sense that had been with him so long guided him through the thick jungle.

Sometimes stray thoughts popped into his mind: *a man named Murdoch will come to you this morning and offer you a job.*

Other times, it would be more subtle: a shadowy wordless feeling that to take a given path would be unwise, that danger lurked somewhere

Still other times he felt nothing at all. Fortunately this happened infrequently.

Brannon knew without knowing that the party would reach the Nurillin village on time. It was only a matter of picking one foot up and slogging it back down a yard further ahead, of mechanically marching on and on and on through the endless jungle that made up so much of the planet Cutwold.

Overhead Caveer climbed

toward noon height, sending down cascades of golden-green radiance. Rhawn's wife asked once, "How soon will we be out of this dreadful jungle?"

Rhawn said, "Darling, be patient. This is one of the last places in the universe where we can do something like this. What an experience it'll be to tell about! When we're vacationing again next season, won't we be envied so!"

"I suppose you're right, dear."

Brannon's lips firmed grimly. *I suppose you're right, dear.*

He could picture them gossiping now—of the time they came across the secret village of aliens on Cutwold, and killed them for trophies because the Galactic Government had not said it was illegal. As these rich socialites roved from pleasure-spot to pleasure-spot, they would repeat the story, boasting of the time they had killed on Cutwold.

"You look angry," a soft voice said. "I wish I knew why you always look so angry."

Brannon had known a moment in advance: Marya Llewellyn had left her place in line and had come to his side. He glanced down at her. "Angry? Me?"

"Don't try to hide it, Brannon. Your face is dark and bitter. You're strange, Brannon."

He shrugged. "It comes from long years in the outworlds, Mrs. Llewellyn. Men get strange out here."

"Call me Marya, won't you?" Her voice was low. "Do you think we'll reach the Nurillins' village today?"

"Hard to tell. We're making a good pace, but if Mrs. Damon gets tired and has to rest, or if a herd of thunder-beasts decides to cut across our path, there'll be delays. We may have to camp out again tonight. I can't help it if we do."

Her warm body brushed against his. "I won't mind. If we *do* camp out—tonight, when everyone's asleep—let's stay awake, Brannon. Just the two of us."

For a moment he failed to see what she meant. Then he did, and he scowled and quickened his pace. One betrayal was bad enough...but not two. He thought of golden Lethii, and the harsh angles of his face deepened.

He looked back. Llewellyn

was marching on, not knowing or not caring about his wife's behavior. The others showed some sign of strain, all but stony-faced Murdoch bringing up the rear and the tireless Napoli.

"I'm exhausted," Mrs. Damon said. "Can we rest a while, Mr. Brannon?"

"No," he said, surprising her. "This is dangerous country we're passing through. These shining-leaved bushes here—they're nesting places for the giant scorpions. We have to keep moving. I want to reach the village before nightfall if possible."

At his side Marya Llewellyn emitted a little gasp. "You said that deliberately!"

"Maybe. Maybe I'm turning you down because I'm afraid of getting mixed up in a quarrel."

"My husband's a silly fool. He won't cause us any trouble."

"I wasn't talking about your husband. I was talking about Murdoch."

For a second he thought she would spring at him and rake his eyes with her enamelled fingernails. But color returned to her suddenly pale face after a moment. She glared at him in open hatred and dropped back into formation, leaving him alone at the head of the line.

Brannon shook his head. He felt sudden fatigue, but forced himself to accelerate the pace.

NOON passed. A flock of scaly air-lizards passed by and showered them with nauseous droppings at twelve-thirty; Brannon brought one down with a quick shot of his handgun and showed the grisly beast to the group. Marshall photographed it. He had been taking photographs steadily.

After a brief rest at one, they moved on. Brannon set a sturdy pace, determined not to spend another night in the jungle before reaching the village. At two, they paused by a waterhole to splash cooling water on their parched faces.

"How about a swim?" Marya asked. She began to strip.

"I wouldn't advise it," said Brannon. "These waterholes are populated. Tadpoles the size of your thumb that'll eat your toes off while you swim and work their way up your

body in two minutes."

"Oh," she said faintly. There was no swimming.

They moved on. And at three-thirty Brannon paused, signalling for quiet, and listened to the jungle noises.

To the steady *thrum... thrum...thrum...*of the giant toads. To the sound that meant they had reached the Nurillins' village.

Brannon narrowed his eyes. He turned to Murdoch and said, "All right, we're here. The Nurillins live just up ahead. From now on it's your show, Murdoch."

The hunt leader nodded. "Right. Listen to me, all of you. You're to fire one shot at a time, at only one of the beasts."

The beasts, Brannon thought broodingly, thinking of Vroyain the poet. *The beasts.*

"When you've brought down your mark," Murdoch went on, "get to one side and wait. As soon as each of you has dropped one, we're finished. We'll collect the trophies and return to the settlement. Aim for the heart, or else you may spoil the head and ruin the trophy. Brannon, are these creatures dangerous in any way?"

"No," Brannon said quietly. *Thrum...thrum...* "They're not dangerous. But keep an eye out for the giant toads. They can kill."

"That's your job," Murdoch said. "You and I will cover the group while the kill is going on." He looked around. "Is everything understood? Good. Let's go."

THEY headed forward, moving cautiously now, guns drawn and ready. The thrumming of the toads grew more intense. Brannon saw landmarks he had not seen before. The village was not far. They were virtually at the point now where he had been attacked by the toads, before Lethii had rescued him.

Thrum...thrum...

The sudden croaking sounds were loud—and a toad burst from the underbrush, a Nurillin mounted astride the ugly creature. Brannon stared at the Nurillin but did not recognize him.

"That one's mine," Napoli said before anyone else of the group was aware of what was happening. The burly hunts-

man lowered his rifle and pumped one shot through the Nurillin's heart.

Brannon winced. That was the first one.

The Nurillin dropped from his mount, a look of astonishment frozen on his face. The toad uttered three defiant bellows and waddled forward, mouth opening, deadly tongue coiling in readiness, as Napoli went to claim his kill.

"Watch out for the frog," Brannon warned.

Napoli laughed. And then the tongue flicked out and wrapped itself around the big man's bull-like neck and throat. Napoli gagged and clawed at his throat, trying to say the word "Help" and failing.

Brannon's first shot severed the outstretched pink tongue, breaking the link between the toad and Napoli. His second shot ripped a gaping hole in the toad's pouting throat. Napoli reeled away, gasping for air, and ripped the tongue away from his skin. It came away bloody; a line of red circled his neck like the mark of a noose.

"I thought I could outmaneuver him," Napoli said. "But that tongue moved like lightning."

"I warned you," Brannon said. Napoli knelt by the dead Nuriillin.

"This one's mine," he repeated. "I got mine."

They moved on, rounding a bend in the path, coming now to the outskirts of the village itself. Four male Nurillins were coming toward them, their green eyes sharp with accusation. Again, Brannon did not know any of them. He was thankful for that much.

"What were those shots?" asked one of them in the Nurillian tongue. Brannon was the only one who could understand, and he could make no reply.

It was Marshall's wife who spoke first. "Why...they're just like *people!*" she said in wonderment.

"Of course," her husband snapped dourly. "That's why we're here." He lowered his gun to firing level and sent the rightmost Nurillin sprawling with a quick shot. The other three turned to flee, but were dropped rapidly with bullets from the guns of Rhawn, his

wife, and—of all p e o p l e—grandmotherly Mrs. Damon.

That makes five, Brannon thought. *Five corpses.*

Four more and it would all be over.

T r i c k l e s of alien blood stained the forest sand now. The four dead Nurillins lay with limbs grotesquely tangled, and the four successful huntsmen were beaming with pride.

And more Nurillins were coming. Many of them. Brannon shuddered.

"Here comes a batch of them," Murdoch shouted. "Be ready to move fast."

"They won't hurt you," said Brannon. "They don't understand violence. That's why they ran away."

THEY came, though, to see what the disturbance was. Brannon turned and saw Llewellyn levelling for a distance shot, his mild face bright with killing fever, his eyes fixed. He fired, and brought down Darhuing the musician. The Nurillin toppled out of the front row of the advancing aliens.

"I'd like another one," Napoli said. "Let me get another one."

"No!" Brannon said.

"He's right," said Murdoch. "Just one each. Just one."

Marshall's wife picked off her trophy before the aliens reached the glade. The second to die was a stranger to Brannon. The others scattered, ducking into the under-brush on both sides of the road—but not before Leopold Damon had fired. His shot caught a Nurillin slightly above the heart and sent the alien spinning backward ten feet.

Eight were dead, now. And only one Nurillin had not saught hiding.

Lethii.

She came forward slowly, staring without comprehension at the little knot of gunbearing Earthmen.

"Brannon," she said. "Brannon. What are you doing?" The liquid syllables of the alien tongue seemed harsh and accusing.

"I—I—"

She stood slim and unafraid near two fallen Nurillins and stared bitterly at Brannon. "You have come back...but your friends kill!"

"I had to do it," Brannon said. "It was. . . for your sake. For your tribe's sake. For my sake."

"How can that be? You brought these poeple here to kill us—and you say it's good?"

She doesn't understand, Brannon thought drearily. "I can't explain," he said.

"Listen! He's speaking her language!" Mrs. Damon exclaimed.

"Watch out Brannon," said Marya Llewellyn suddenly. She laughed in derision.

"No," Brannon said. But for once his foresight failed him. Before he could turn, before he could deflect Marya's aim, she had fired, still laughing.

Lethii stared at him gravely, reproachfully, for a fragment of a second. Then she put her hand to her chest and fell, headlong into the dust.

THE journey back to the settlement seemed to take forever. Brannon led the way, eyes fixed ahead of him, never looking back, never speaking. Behind came the nine, each with a trophy, each with the deep satisfaction of knowing he had murdered an intelligent being and would go scot-free.

Brannon was remembering. Remembering the look on nine Nurillin faces as they fell to the ground, remembering especially that of the ninth victim. Lethii. It had *had* to be her, of course. Her, out of the three thousand. That was necessarily part of the betrayal.

It took a day and a half to reach the main settlement again; Brannon did not sleep in the tent with the others, but remained outside, sitting near the fire with his hands locked across his knees, thinking. Just thinking.

It was late in the afternoon when the group stumbled out of the edge of the jungle and found themselves back in civilization. They stood together, in a nervous little group.

Murdoch said, "I want to thank you, Brannon. You got us there, and you got us back, and that's more than I sometimes thought you were going to do."

"Don't thank me, Murdoch. Just get going. Get off Cutwold as fast as you can, and

take your nine killers with you."

Murdoch flinched. "They weren't *people,* those aliens. You still can't understand that. The Treaty doesn't say anything about them, and so they're just animals."

"Go on," Brannon said hoarsely. "Go. Fast."

He looked at them—puffed up with pride they were, at having gone into the jungle and come out alive. It would have been so easy to kill them in the jungle, Brannon thought wearily. Marya Llewellyn was looking blackly at him, her body held high, as if inviting him. She had known about Lethii. That was why she had waited, and fired last, killing her.

"We want to say goodbye, Mr. Brannon," gushed Mrs. Damon. "You were just wonderful."

"Don't bother," Brannon said. He spat at their feet. Then he turned and slowly ambled away, not looking back.

He came into Vuornik's Bar. They were all there, Vuornik, and Barney Karris, and the eight or nine other regular barflies. They were all staring at him. They knew, all of them. They knew.

"Hello, Judas," Karris said acidly. A knife glinted in his belt. He was ready to defend himself.

But Brannon didn't feel like fighting. He slouched down next to the bar and said, "Give me the usual, Vuornik. Double khalla, straight."

"I don't know as I want to serve you in my place, Brannon. I don't know."

Brannon took one of Murdoch's bills from his back pocket and dropped it on the bar. "There's my money. My money's good. *Give me that drink, Vuornik!*"

His tone left little doubts. Vuornik said nervously, "Okay, Brannon. Don't fly up in an uproar." He poured the drink.

Brannon sipped it numbly, hoping it would wipe away the pain and the guilt. It didn't.

Judas, he thought. *Judas.*

He wasn't any Judas. He had done what was right.

If he hadn't led Murdoch to the Nurillins, Murdoch would have gone himself. Sooner or later he would have found them. He would have destroyed them all...not just these nine.

But now there had been a hunt. Nine trophies had been brought back. Murdoch's nine hunters would boast, and the Nurillins would no longer be secret. Soon, someone high in government circles would learn that there was a species in the galaxy still unprotected from hunters. Survey ships would come and the Nurillins would be declared untouchable.

It had had to happen. But there would be no more hunting parties to the interior of Cutwold now that the galaxy knew the Nurillins existed. They would be safe from now on, Brannon hoped. Safe at the cost of nine lives...and one man's soul.

No one would ever forgive him on Cutwold. He would forgive himself. *But he had done the right thing. He hadn't any choice.*

He finished his drink and scooped up his change and walked slowly across the barroom, out into the open. The sun was setting. It was a lovely sight—but Brannon couldn't appreciate it now.

"So long, Judas," came Karris' voice drifting after him out of the bar. "So long, Judas."

THE END

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PYROPHORICITY

by WHARTON PEPPER

Pyrophoricity is a word that may be making the headlines as we enter the age of atomic technology. It means the tendency of certain metals to explode or burn spontaneously, like a heap of old oil-soaked rags, and it's a problem now being faced on a serious scale in the nation's atomics plants.

Many of the metals used in nuclear technology—particularly uranium, plutonium, thorium, and zirconium—are pyrophoric. When explosions ripped an atomics laboratory in Queens, New York, last summer, the problem was dramatically highlighted: a small lump of powdered thorium had suddenly and surprisingly exploded, thereby detonating larger quantities of the metal nearby.

The Atomic Energy Commission is sponsoring deep-level research into the dangerous phenomenon.

Basically, metals explode for the same reason that causes spontaneous combustion of oil-soaked rags: slow oxidation produces heat which is stored in the material, finally building up to ignition temperatures.

Already the instances of pyrophoretic explosions are numerous. Zirconium scrap stored in open bins took fire after a heavy rainstorm, and 159,000 pounds of the metal were consumed. Two men died and two others were seriously injured when they opened a one-gallon can of zirconium powder; the metal exploded as soon as the cover came off.

Three flat plates of compressed uranium powder were seen to be swelling, and were removed from the building in which they were stored. The next morning one of the plates exploded; a witness said it "took off like a rocket," hitting a tree 30 feet away.

GET RICH QUICK

by RICHARD R. SMITH

illustrated by ORBAN

There was one way to get money on Delira. The pay was high, it could make a man rich overnight. But was it worth it? Had that greedy girl thought of *everything?*

"*EIGHT o'clock.*"

Brik jumped and almost dropped the ice cube container. The two of them were the only ones in his apartment and the voice had been distinctly a woman's.

"It's just my wrist watch," Sumner explained as he held it up for illustration.

"*Just* your wrist watch?" Brik stirred the drinks, handed him one and dropped into a chair. "I've never heard of a watch that talks!"

"This one does. The Delirans gave it to me as a sort of going-away present."

Brik gulped his drink and prodded, "Delira sounds like an interesting planet."

Deep lines in Sumner's forehead met and formed a continuous pattern when he frowned. "It's too interesting. By comparison, returning to Earth is like coming back to a dim four by four cell."

"Is that why Karla didn't come back?"

"No. She asked me to deliver a message to you and it explains her reason for staying. I quote, *Tell him I'll be waiting and if he wants to be a millionaire, he'd better come.*"

"Huh?"

"Those were her exact words. I asked her how she planned to make you a millionaire but she wouldn't tell me."

Brik closed his eyes and tried

to concentrate. He knew his fiancee was above average, but asking him to travel across space for a half a year with the promise that he'd be a millionaire was the strangest request she'd ever made of him.

"Are there many ways to make a fortune on Delira?"

Sumner shook his head. "There are no ways, believe me. When the UN appointed me as Earth's ambassador, I thought I'd be able to swing some legitimate deals on the side to make money. I soon discovered that an Earthman has *nothing* to offer Delirans."

"I thought any planet with a high currency exchange rate was a good place to get rich."

"That's a popular mistake of people who don't understand that angle of financing," the diplomat informed him. "Trouble is, currency exchange is frequently one-way: a Deliran dollar is worth a thousand Earth dollars. That's a simple illustration, but it's the basic principle behind currency exchange."

"So, if a person could get a thousand Deliran watches; he could sell them for a million dollars. Or, if he earned a thousand Deliran dollars, he could exchange them at a bank for a million?"

Sumner nodded his head affirmatively. "Trouble is, there's no way for an Earthman to get a thousand Deliran watches or dollars. We have no exports that they want to buy and they never hire an Earthman for any reason because their machines can do any job a hundred times better than one of us could."

"And despite all that, Karla has found a way to make a fortune?"

"She *thinks* she has, and she's waiting for you."

"How do I get there?"

SUMNER'S dark eyes gleamed with amusement. "It's not the easiest place in the galaxy to reach. In fact, it's so hard to reach, there's no more than a dozen Earthmen there at present. Millionaires buy spaceships and go, but when they return, they're no longer millionaires. The government sent me to straighten out a few diplomatic matters. Outside of those two ways, there's only one other way... go as a spaceship mechanic."

"I'm a white collar man, not a mechanic!"

"You could use one of those Sleeplearn gadgets to learn all you have to know in a few months while you sleep nights. The Apex Import-Export Company sends freight ships to Delira every six months. They do not carry a cargo and they're not designed to carry passengers, but their insurance policy stipulates that every ship must have a mechanic aboard. If you went, you'd spend the trip in a six by six compartment and if you want to see Karla that much, I'll pull some strings and get you the job."

"That sounds—"

"Before you give me your decision," Sumner interrupted, "I'd like to say something as a friend rather than Karla's uncle if I may."

Brik hesitated. Sumner was always outspoken and when he drank heavily as he'd done during his visit, he was likely to say *anything*. Holding his breath, he said, "Go ahead."

"I think you'd be crazy if you went," Sumner stated. "Karla is a wonderful, attractive girl, but she's a little gold digger. When she asked me to take her to Delira with me, she said it was because she wanted to 'see Delira'. I knew her real reason...she hoped she'd find some way of getting rich there. She's the kind of person who'd do almost anything if there was enough money in it and I'd hate to think of you tangled up with her in a place like that. It's a sort of gold digger's nightmare...a place where you see a fortune everywhere you go, and yet there's no way to get your hands on any of it."

"I'll go," Brik stated flatly. "You forgot...I love that gold digger." *And besides,* he thought, *if anyone can find a way to get rich on Delira, Karla can and I wouldn't mind being rich!*

"Eight thirty," the watch said. "Time to leave or you'll miss your plane."

Brik walked with his guest to the door and remembered another question, "You said Apex sends empty ships to Delira. I suppose that's because we don't have anything they want, but what do the ships bring back?"

Sumner grinned wryly. "Old

clothes, broken toys and other things donated by Deliran organizations equivalent to our Salvation Army. Their clothes are of a material that never wears out and even their broken toys are better than any we manufacture. The items sell for high prices, but Apex barely makes a profit every year. It costs a lot to send a ship to Delira."

AFTER what seemed centuries, the Starfleet landed at a Deliran spaceport and Brik stumbled down the ladder eagerly. His surroundings were disappointing: he'd expected a gigantic port crowded with hundreds of ships constantly landing and taking off. Instead, the landing field was smaller than most on Earth and only three other ships were visible.

The field seemed to be located in the middle of a wilderness and a cluster of low buildings was the only sign of civilization, so he headed toward them.

He searched for an information desk but discovered there was none. After wandering through a maze of empty corridors for half an hour, he found the bulletin board and the note tacked to it, *Dear Brik, sorry I couldn't meet you, but there's no way of knowing when you'll arrive. To your left is a brown platform. Stand on it, dial these numbers and it will take you to my apartment. Love, Karla.* The 'numbers' at the bottom of the note were Deliran symbols that resembled chicken tracks, but when he examined the dialing mechanism on the brown platform, he found corresponding symbols.

When he had carefully dialed the last number in the proper sequence, he looked up and saw that the spaceport building had disappeared.

The spectacle before him was like none he'd ever seen. Chairs tables, bookcases, lamps and beds were grouped in a pattern as if placed in rooms, but there were *no walls*. Trees surrounded the 'apartment' as if it were no more than a clearing in a primitive forest and fleecy clouds high above him drifted slowly across a deep blue sky.

"Brik!"

She ran to him and enveloped him in a passionate embrace before he had time to open his mouth. During the

next few minutes, he realized more fully why he'd waited for her. If he'd been engaged to any other woman and she had run off with her uncle to a distant planet, he wouldn't have waited. But, Karla was worth waiting for...

"You call this an apartment?" he asked when he had a chance.

Her dark brown eyes twinkled and he knew that she was amused by his bewilderment. "Nice, isn't it? Want to see the rest of it?"

He followed her about the clearing while she explained the intricate machines and other furnishings. "The Delirans aren't hampered by lack of space," she said. "They've explored and conquered the dimensions and this is actually in another dimension. The forest over there is some sort of plastic although you can't tell it from the real thing."

He paused before a six foot plant with colorful, myriad shaped blossoms and whistled. "What's its name?"

"Pretty isn't it? I went to a park one day and when I came back, I put my shoes aside. When I started to put that pair on again a week later, I noticed this growing out of some sand in one." She grinned sheepishly. "It was so small then...only about an inch tall ...I felt sorry for it and planted it here. It hasn't got a name...it's a weed."

"A weed," Brik repeated dully and thought, *On Delira, the weeds are more beautiful than Earth's most beautiful flowers!* For the first time since his arrival, he felt a queasiness in his stomach.

THEY had made a complete circle of the apartment and he selected a comfortable chair in what Karla probably considered the living room. "How do you afford a place like this?" he asked. "Your uncle says it's hard to make money on Delira."

"I don't pay rent," she explained. "The Delirans have places like this for Earthmen and they're equivalent to our poor houses. They realize we can't pay our way and I suppose they'd rather spend a few of their dollars than have us starve to death in their streets."

"Generous," Brik complimented the aliens.

Her thin eyebrows lost their attractive curve as she frowned and her voice was suddenly tinged with bitterness, "The cost of this place is chicken feed to them."

"Your uncle said you have a plan to get rich," he said abruptly.

"That's right."

"What is it?"

She waved a slender hand at what was evidently a bathroom. "I'll tell you when I get back. You can take a shower if you want, and before you're through, I'll have all the arrangements made and we'll be millionaires before the day is over!"

When Brik had showered, he changed into fresh clothes, went to the living room and found that Karla had returned and was smiling from ear to ear. "Everything is ready," she informed him.

"What's the big plan?"

"It's a simple one," she said. "The Delirans won't buy anything we have to sell because all their products are better. They aren't interested in any of our talents except *one*...the ability to fight. That's the only way to make money here. They have few fighters...I suppose it's against their nature...but there are bloodthirsty Delirans just like there's bloodthirsty individuals in any race and they pay to see a fight. I've arranged for you to fight a man named Graham."

"*Fight?* A boxing match? I don't know how to box!"

She frowned at his reluctance. "Graham is no professional. The two of you can bluff your way through and the income will be five thousand Deliran dollars. That's equivalent to *five million* in our currency and even after we share half with Graham, we'll have two and a half million. That's good pay for a bloody nose!"

Brik lit a cigarette and fought the rising anger inside him. He didn't like to be pushed into anything and Karla had made all the decisions and arrangements without consulting him.

"We're lucky you got here when you did," she said. "Two men staged a boxing match a few months ago. They're on

their way back to Earth as millionaires and when they spread the news, thousands of professional fighters will come." She glanced at her watch and rose. "If you're not going to back out, it's time to go."

He shrugged his shoulders. Two and a half million was good pay for a bloody nose. It was even good pay for a few broken bones!

"You win," he said.

He followed her to the matter-transmitter and as soon as she completed dialing a number, the apartment vanished.

THEY were standing in a valley of majestic towers. High above them, slender bridges spanned the gulfs between the towering, multicolored buildings, and linked them all together with a lacy labyrinth. The streets were wide avenues of bright plastic that gleamed in the sunlight and he saw the Delirans for the first time.

Their appearance was startling: they were an incongruity on their own planet. Although their civilization was the most advanced in the galaxy and their planet was like a magnificent paradise, they were frail creatures with yellowish flesh and antennae that seemed as fragile as strands of straw.

"Those are the things who made all *this?*" Brik asked unbelievingly as they crossed a street of sparkling clean plastic. "They look as impressive as bugs!"

"Don't let their appearance fool you," Karla said. "Their race is almost twice as old as ours. When our civilization is as old as theirs, it might be even more advanced, but at the present time, they're the most intelligent beings in the galaxy."

He followed her through a triangular doorway and down a long corridor. "You certainly made arrangements for this fight quick enough. How are the spectators going to have time to get here?"

"There won't be any spectators now," she informed him. "The fight will be recorded on something like film and then copies of it will be sold later. I told Graham about you months ago and he's been waiting for you to come. He wants to be

rich...especially when he only has to bluff his way through a fight."

She stopped and indicated the door before them. "This is it. About half an hour from now, it'll all be over and we'll be rich." She kissed him, disappeared through another doorway and he was alone in the corridor.

When he reached out, the door opened at his touch and he stepped into a large, metal-walled room. The floor and walls were smooth and blank, but he saw that the ceiling was covered with strange devices that would evidently record the fight.

Graham waited on the other side of the room, his muscular arms swinging loosely at his sides.

Two and a half million is *good pay for a few bruises,* Brik reminded himself when he realized that Graham was a much stronger man.

He watched numbly as Graham picked up a knife near his feet. The truth was like an explosion in his mind: Karla had lied. Deliran's wouldn't pay to see a mere exchange of fistcuffs, but they would pay to see something much more exciting as a duel with knives...

He picked up the knife near his own feet and remembered Sumner's warning, *She's a little gold digger...the kind of person who'd do almost anything if there was enough money in it.*

When Graham moved toward him, Brik saw that he was holding the knife so tightly that his thick knuckles were white over the handle. Together with the expression in his hard eyes, it was enough to tell him that he'd been tricked into a fight to the death.

He wondered briefly what sort of arrangements Karla had made. Would she still receive her share of the profits if he was killed? It was logical: if it was necessary for him to live in order to get her share, she would have told him the truth about the fight and let him prepare for it.

HIS thoughts were interrupted when Graham lunged, his knife darting through the air like a live thing. He side-

stepped but was too slow and felt a hot pain in his shoulder.

Blood trickled down his arm and he realized he didn't want to risk his life for two and a half million or *any* amount of money. He would have willingly fought with his fists, but fighting with knives against a stronger man who had obviously trained was suicide!

He ran to the door. There was no knob, so he shoved against the cold metal with all his strength.

Nothing happened.

He turned as Graham made another charge and knew he would have to fight for his life...

The duel lasted only minutes but it seemed like an eternity of dodging, slashing with the knife and driving muscles that ached with tension. His eyes burned with sweat from his forehead and his mouth was filled with the acrid taste of blood. His breath was a harsh thing in his ears and Graham's exclamations of anger were like the grunts of a savage beast.

His body was soon a maze of searing pain and the metal walls of the room seemed to recede until, in all the universe there was only Graham and himself as they fought.

And then, like an event in a dream, he felt his legs crumble beneath him and knew he had lost...

Death was an absence of all things, and he floated in a vast, swirling gulf of nothingness...

...until, nova-like in its abruptness, something entered the emptiness...an intangible, indescribable *something*.

His brain was the first organ to function again and it vaguely recorded the revival of his body. He felt his heart pump blood once more and felt the crimson current hesitate in arteries and veins that had changed drastically in the interval of death. He felt the arteries and veins swiftly become normal and sensed his lungs as they labored furiously with the new surge of life. He heard the exhalation of his breath and opened his eyes...

It was a small room filled with strange machines that hummed and clicked continuously as if they were living things trying to communicate with him.

Karla kissed him on the forehead.

"I was dead?" he asked unbelievingly.

"Yes," Karla admitted. "The Deliran machines can make the dead live again. To them, restoring life is as simple as healing a broken bone is to us."

"No," he said. "It can't be."

Karla smiled and said gently, "It's not as crazy as it sounds. Our own scientists have done it in a few cases, but the Delirans have perfected the process."

He inhaled deeply, smelled Karla's perfume mingled with the odor of alien antiseptics and knew it was the truth.

"I'm sorry I lied to you," Karla apologized. "I was afraid you wouldn't agree if you knew what kind of fight it was to be. It's all over now and we're *millionaires*." She held a piece of paper before his eyes and he saw that it was covered with the odd Deliran symbols. "This is a check for twenty five hundred Deliran dollars," she explained "Worth two and a half million in our currency!"

"You lied to me," he said.

She frowned and explained again, "I lied because I was afraid you wouldn't do it. This was our only chance to get rich. I had to think of everything."

"Did you think of *everything?*" he asked. As he rose from the operating table, he was aware of a strange emptiness inside him. He walked across the room, flexed his fingers experimentally and thought, *What about the soul? If a person dies, the soul leaves the body and if life is restored to the body, can the Deliran machines also drag the soul back from heaven or hell and stuff it back inside the body?*

As he looked about the room, an even more terrifying thought occurred, *If you've lost something as intangible as your soul, how do you know you've lost it?*

Turning to face Karla, he repeated, "Did you think of *everything?*"

THE END

LIFE SPAN OF EARTH

by EUGENE W. POTTER

Six billion years is the expected life-span of the earth, if a prediction by a Palomar and Mount Wilson astronomer has any validity. Allen R. Sandage says that at the end of six billion years the sun, now six billion years old, will flare up and destroy all life in the solar system.

According to Sandage a star of our sun's type remains stable from time of formation until thermonuclear reactions have converted about 12 percent of its hydrogen to helium. His calculations have it that our sun is about halfway through this period of equilibrium. During the past six billion years it has increased in heat very slightly, causing a rise of only about 36 degrees Fahrenheit in the Earth's average temperature.

In the next six billion years it may raise the temperature by about the same amount, a change to which living forms should be able to adapt without stress. But when 12 percent of the solar hydrogen has been consumed, the sun will suddenly heat up and swell to 30 times its present diameter, becoming a "nova." Within a few hundred million years—a brief moment astronomically—temperatures on earth will rise to 1500 degrees, well above the boiling point of lead. The ocean will boil away and life will cease.

After the sun has consumed its remaining hydrogen, it will shrink in on itself and become a white dwarf. The more massive a star, the shorter its life; if the sun were only 10 percent heavier than it is, says Sandage, it would already be in the heating-up stage and life would be extinct.

QUARANTINED SPECIES

by J. F. BONE

illustrated by ORBAN

Those Venusian horgels were cute, clever, intelligent. They made perfect pets. They were lovable. — But that was the big trouble. They were much, much too lovable!

"DID you ever own a cat?" Thompson asked. He leaned forward, a small gray man in his late sixties, and peered at his visitor through oldfashioned bifocals across the breadth of desk which separated them. The young man standing before the desk fidgeted impatiently as Thompson looked down at the interview card which read "Edward Farnsworth,—Agent, Worldwide Shows", and scratched the ears of the big Siamese cat sitting on his lap. The cat looked up with incurious blue eyes, regarded Farnsworth with a peculiarly dispassionate stare. stretched, yawned, and closed his eyes again. It was perfectly apparent that the tall swarthy visitor was a matter of complete disinterest. "Now take Cato, here," Thompson continued. "He's a fine specimen of a cat. Have you owned anything like him?"

"Once," Farnsworth said. "When I went to Venus. But I don't see what this has to do with my business with you. All I want is a simple answer. Do I or do I not get permission to import a pair of Venusian horgels?"

"You do not," Thompson said succinctly.

"This makes the fourth time," Farnsworth sighed. "So

I'll have to go to higher authority, I suppose."

"There is no higher authority, son. This is the end of the line."

"You bureaucrats!" Farnsworth's voice was filled with poorly suppressed anger. "You sit here behind a desk and play God! Tell us working people what they can and can't do just as though you knew all the answers, and never give a tinker's dam about the fact that your stupid decisions can ruin people. Just why in heaven's name won't you allow something cute and clever like the horgels to be brought to Earth? There's nothing wrong with them. They'll survive nicely in a terrestrial environment.—and they'll save our show from bankruptcy. People will simply love them if they're given a chance."

"I suppose they would," Thompson said, "but I doubt if they'll ever get a chance to do it. They're a quarantined species." There was an odd note of grimness in his voice. "Cat's don't like them," he added obliquely.

"What's that got to do with it?"

"I repeat,—have you ever owned a cat?"

"And I repeat, sir, I did. It was mandatory to own one on Venus,—although why it was, God only knows. There are millions of cats there, and to require a man to lead a Siamese around on a leash is sheer foolishness!"

"You're like all the rest," Thompson sighed. "You confuse words with facts. You never owned a cat in your life."

"But—"

"You just think you did," Thompson concluded gently.

"I have papers to prove it."

"So what? Did your cat ever obey you when it didn't wish to? Did it ever sacrifice its comfort for your own? Did it ever go out of its way to be good to you?"

Farnsworth shook his head. "I can't say that it did," he admitted. "It was a nasty selfish brute. I loathe cats!"

"But you like horgels."

"Yes,—I'm quite fond of them. They're cute, and clever, —and loveable."

"Hmp! Yes,—they are.

That's the trouble with them. They're *too* cute, *too* clever, and *too* loveable!"

"That's impossible!"

"That so?— Just a moment son. How long were you around those horgels?"

"Just a few days. A swamp-rat owned them. Kept them in a locked cage, and never touched them. He even had one of the natives feed them. The poor little things were terrified. I don't think they'd ever been in a cage before, and I can't see why they were. They're the softest most endearing things. They'd make perfect pets."

"Undoubtedly they would," Thompson said. "Well, there's no damage done. Oh by the way, did you see any cats about the place?"

"No,—none but my own,—I heard them. Nasty brutes that yowled all night."

"That's one worry taken care of. I was afraid that I'd have to ask you where that trader lived, and I know you wouldn't tell me. Thompson beamed pleasantly at him over his spectacles. "The cats will take care of them. It's just a matter of time."

"You mean that they'll kill those inoffensive little things?"

"Of course. It's a matter of priority rights." There was iron in Thompson's voice. "Cat's are great believers in direct action. Now sit down, young man and I'll tell you why you'll never get an entry permit from this office, and why you'll never again be allowed to visit Venus."

"But you can't do that!"

"I already have," Thompson said gently. "I revoked your ship permit before I ever saw you."

"You what?"

"You heard me son. Venus is closed."

"But why?"

"Sit down and I'll tell you."

Farnsworth sputtered, but did what he was told. At least, he reflected bitterly, he should get something out of this highly unsatisfactory interview.

"THAT'S fine," Thompson beamed. "There's nothing like acquiring knowledge. And the first bit of knowledge you should acquire is that I haven't always been a bureaucrat. Once I was a biotechnician in the Space Service, and I was a member of the first ex-

pedition to Venus. There were five of us on the "Venus I". Archie Slezak the pilot, Ed Smith the navigator, Mitsui Watanabe the engineer, and myself. And then there was Katy, the ship's cat.

She was an unlisted crew member, a big, black, short-haired cat of dubious ancestry. From her size, I'd judge that there was a little wildcat somewhere in her family tree, but despite the fact that she looked like a black panther, she was affectionate enough in her way, and we all endured her,—all except Watanabe. He liked her. I think he smuggled her aboard before we took off even though he never admitted it. He was a sucker for pets. But she never paid too much attention to him. Generally she was nosing around in dark corners of the ship once accelleration pressure was off.

We had a little artificial gravity of course, but it was about one eighth Earth normal, just enough to keep our feet. Katy loved it. It was nothing for her to leap twenty feet across the control room, and land on one of our shoulders, so lightly that we hardly felt her. She had an incredible judgment of distance, and would amuse us by the hour with her antics.

As far as cats went, she was likeable enough, but I never really trusted her. There was a little too much of the wildcat in her." he reached down and scratched Cato's ears and smiled when the big tom swore at him in low Siamese.

"Then why—" Farnsworth began.

"Save it son,—I'll explain. As I was saying, we all thought she was amusing but useless until the day she came floating into the control room with a dead rat in her jaws. It was a pregnant female filled with pups, and I'll tell you it scared us silly!

Rats and spaceships just don't go together. They breed fast and mutate easily in the drive radiations, and once they get started they're hard to control. It's particularly bad if an intelligent mutation appears, but Katy stopped that threat before it ever got started.

We got into spacesuits and blew the ship down. Not even

rats can live in a vacuum, and we kept the ship open long enough to make sure the last trace of air was removed from the fiberglass insulation of the hull. Fortunately, none of our unwanted guests had been exposed to the drive radiations long enough for mutations to appear, so we managed to get a complete kill. Watanabe had fixed a pressure tank for Katy, and during the blowdown she sat in it as smug as a dowager empress while we killed off the rats.

After that, Katy was a heroine. And did she take advantage of it! It was almost as though she knew she had reached privileged status. She'd boss us around, and glare at us to move if we were sitting on one of her favorite spots. She wasn't very nice about it, and if you've been bossed by a cat you'll understand what I mean.

She liked to be petted, but wanted affection on her own terms and time, and she picked the damndest times. Whenever Smitty was busy with calcualtions, there would be Katy sitting in the middle of his papers, tail straight up in the air, her back arched, and her purr as loud as a dynamotor. And when I checked the algae tanks for ecological balance, there she'd be trying to unbalance the ecology. And if Mitsui wanted to check the engines he always had to check the cat first. She was a pest.

But poor Slezak got it worst. For some unknown reason Katy liked him,—and Archie hated cats. She'd fuss over him, croon cat talk to him, and then slump bonelessly on his lap and sleep.

Archie's body temperature probably had a lot to do with it, since it was a full degree warmer than the rest of ours, but Slezak used to say that she did it deliberately out of sheer orneriness,—and I wouldn't disagree with him.

Anything was possible where Katy was concerned. She looked on the ship and all that was in it as her personal propery, especially created for her comfort and amusement, and she used it just that way. There was something direct about her that didn't bother with such niceties as form and attitude. She was a cat,—we

were only human,—and she was never averse to putting us in our place.

WE spent two months coasting under minimum power, and then started the braking run. We blasted down after turnover until we got the trajectory straightened out, and then let Venus do the rest. We circled the planet just above the ion belt where the few molecules of atmosphere slowed us down without too much overheating, making close range observations of the world below.

We checked the atmosphere. The upper layer was mainly carbon dioxide and formaldehyde, just like the astronomy boys said it would be, but it was neither thick nor cloudy. The clouds were all down at the surface. As you know, Venus has a heavy-gas based atmosphere, but even then the oxygen content was high enough to be breathable if you didn't mind the smell of embalming fluid.

Our orders called for landing if it was feasible, so Slezak cleared the board and trimmed ship for a setdown. We made it all right, and landed on one of those humps of land that stick up out of the swamp. There wasn't much to see, of course. Venus was a pretty dismal place what with the steady rain and air that smelled like a cut-rate undertaking parlor. But I shouldn't have to tell you what Venus is like. You've been there too."

"It still is bad," Farnsworth said. "It hasn't improved much."

"Any improvement in Venus would be a lot," Thompson continued. "Well, we did the usual things,—planted the flag and claimed the planet, and then while Slezak and I stayed with the ship, Smitty and Watanabe went exploring. We drew straws for the honor, and Archie and I won.

We stayed close to the ship, peering through the rain for what seemed hours, walking around a little and stretching our legs. We weren't equipped for any real exploration work but we had to do some to make the claim legal. The real work would come later, after the lads back home evaluated our data,

but at least we had the honor of being the first humans to set foot on the planet." Thompson coughed rackingly and smiled when the spasm passed. "The memory still gets me," he explained. "I never could stand formaldehyde. My lungs got over being partially embalmed years ago, but thinking of Venus still makes me cough."

IT was about an hour before Smitty and Mitsui came back. Mitsui had a horgel in his arms. The kid was a sucker for animals, but this time we all thought he really had something. None of us had ever seen a horgel before, and it looked so innocent and appealing that we couldn't help falling for it.

With its pink fur and violet eyes it looked for all the world like a child's doll, a pint-sized teddy bear with a button nose, black, handlike feet, and an expression of utter trust on its pointed face. But that didn't explain all of its appeal. I guess there is a little of the mother in every man, because the damn thing touched something within us that could only be called the maternal instinct. There's nothing else that can describe it. It made us feel all soft inside, and every one of us wanted to hold it and protect it."

"I know," Farnsworth said. "I've held one."

"Mitsui had fallen in love with it. You know how emotional the Japanese are. He was cuddling it in his arms and whispering sweet words into its shell-like ears, and it was crooning back at him. His actions would have made me sick except that I wanted to hold it so bad that it hurt. I wanted to feel the softness of its fur, to pet and fondle it. I wanted it like I'd want a woman. Smitty was green with jealousy and even Slezak looked interested. All of us were acting a little queer. I suppose, but it seemed all right at the time.

Katy didn't react like we did. She came to the entrance port, stepping delicately as though she was treading on eggs and was afraid of breaking them,—but the moment she saw the little pink puffball in Watanabe's arms her whole attitude changed. Her back arched and her tail looked like

a bottle brush! She let out one yowl of pure hate and leaped for Mitsui! Her claws dug into his jacket as she clawed upward toward the horgel, a screaming, spitting fury of insane rage!

The horgel screamed just once. It sounded so much like a hurt baby that we were paralyzed for a moment,—and while we were all standing there, it leaped from Mitsui's arms and ran clumsily across the seared landing area to the jungle some fifty yards away. But it never reached it. Katy was after it like a thunderbolt! She caught it after it had gone about twenty yards, and by the time we reached the scene, she had swiftly and completely demolished it.

Now I've seen cats kill many times, but it always seemed to be more for the fun of it than anything else. Cats appear to hunt for the sport of the thing, but there was no sport in Katy. She simply caught the horgel and tore it to ribbons!

Mitsui was heartbroken. From the way he acted it was almost as though Katy had killed his baby brother. "I loved that little thing!" he sobbed. "I've never seen anything so trusting and affectionate. Oh! *damn* that dirty cat!"

I cocked an interested ear. Mitsui was always the one who had defended Katy. He always liked her,—wasted three times the affection on her than any of the rest of us did. But right now he would have cheerfully killed her. Katy apparently realized how he felt, because she beat a quick retreat to the ship and hid in one of the dark corners she knew so well, while Mitsui prowled after her calling the wrath of his Japanese ancestors down upon her murderous head. Katy, of course, ignored him.

Mitsui calmed down after an hour or so, but he spent the rest of the evening building a strong box with a barred door. "It's not that I don't like Katy." he said apologetically. "But I loved that little thing."

He waited patiently until Katy came out of hiding, scooped her up and popped her suprised body into the box. "Now stay there until you can learn to behave yourself," he

said grimly. Then without a word to us he walked outside and in a half hour came back with another of the pink things. exactly like the one he had lost. He was grinning from ear to ear. "There's a village over there." he said pointing outside the port, "and these animals are as thick as fleas on a dog's back. The natives keep them for pets."

So Mitsui Watanabe was the first one of us to discover the dominant intelligence of Venus. But we weren't thinking of that. We just wanted one of those delightful creatures for our own. And this time there was no drawing straws. We set out in a body, leaving a raging Katy behind us safely locked up in the box.

THE village was a cluster of mud huts filled with little humanoid natives. You know what they're like,—stupid, imitative primitives who follow you around looking for something to beg or steal. I understand that they're no different now than they were.

The only difference was that the village simply swarmed with horgels. They were everywhere, scampering familiarly through the village for all the world like a lot of pet dogs.

As far as we could tell, the humanoids were a harmless lot. From what we could see, they spent their time fishing and taking care of their pets and children. The way they coddled those pink furballs was amazing. I even saw nursing mothers feed them at the same breast they fed their children! It was a perfect expression of the love and tenderness the horgls inspired.

The natives didn't object when we scooped up a horgel apiece and held them in our arms. There were plenty of them and they seemed to be community property. The horgels apparently liked us as much as we liked them, because it was no time at all before we were all acting like kids despite our space ratings, and since you've held a horgel you know how we felt."

Farnsworth nodded. "They are appealing," he said. "I never experienced a sensation quite like holding one of them.

There's no word for it."

"Sure there is, son. Try *love*." Thompson's voice softened and then turned cynical. "Anyway, we took them back to the ship with us, and Katy went crazy in her box. She swore, snarled, screamed, spat and clawed until she was exhausted, and then lay on the bottom of the box and growled at us. It wasn't a nice noise but it did her no good. The box would have held a bobcat. And we weren't listening.

We were fascinated by the horgels. They were wonderful,—soft, clever, affectionate and intelligent too. Mitsui taught his to sit up in a matter of minutes, and for hours afterwards we explored their repertoire of accomplishments.

They could do almost everything but talk,—and they could darn near do that. They seemed to know instinctively what we wanted,—and what w o u l d please us most,—and then they did that thing. It was a happy time for all of us. We never had so much fun simply watching the antics of our new found pets. They were natural comedians, and kept us laughing most of the night. And when we finally turned in, each of us held his horgel in his arms.

And no one remembered to feed Katy.

It probably would have done no good if we had, since she was so mad that she would have refused food. And her disposition didn't improve. But we didn't forget her completely—after a day or so we gave her food and left her alone. If she wanted to eat,—all right. Otherwise we didn't care. Being a cat, and being sensible, she ate. But there was no gratitude or affection for our kindness. She just crouched in the back of the box and spat at us.

WE spent several days on the island in the swamp, but found nothing of interest outside of the natives and the h o r g e l s. We took pictures, made notes, and tried to make some sense out of that perfectly incomprehensible n a t i v e language. But about the only thing we learned was the name of the pink creatures and that everybody loved them.

Of course we had to take off sooner than we would like, but Venus was passing conjunction,

and if we waited too long our fuel supply wouldn't take us back to Earth. So we loaded our horgels and ourselves into the ship, blasted off for Earth, and bade farewell to the formaldehyde stink of Venus' air.

We were a week out, and had built up to terminal velocity when it happened. Somehow Katy managed to open her cage and escape. The first I knew about it was when she killed my horgel,—bit through its spine as it lay sleeping on my bed. She was so quiet that I never knew what had happened until I woke to find my poor little puffball lying cold and stiff in the circle of my arm.

I looked for the cat all the next period, and every free chance I had thereafter. I wanted to kill her. Losing my horgel was just like losing a child! I was disconsolate,—and consumed with envy for my more fortunate crew members. Their horgels were still alive and mine was dead! And my companions were utterly selfish! They must have known how I felt, but they wouldn't share their horgels with me for a moment. I felt like a single man on a desert island peopled by happy and contented couples. I was left out,—and I was miserable!

It's odd how the horgels took on the attributes of all the desireable women I had longed for but never had. The loss of my pet and the obvious callousness of my companions to my feelings made the sense of loss even more sharp than it would have been otherwise. I took it badly. At first I was hurt and miserable. But gradually I began to hate the others for their good fortune, their cruel selfishness, their lack of consideration. And finally my thoughts turned toward murder.

What right did these others have to possess horgels when I had none? I brooded about it during the days we sped Earthward. I was damned if they were going to have all the pleasures of companionship while I was left out in the cold.

I thought it over carefully, and finally decided that Smitty was the one who would least be missed. I waylaid him in the passageway that period, and damn near fractured his skull

with a wrench. He dropped to the deck, blood streaming from his head,—but I didn't give him a thought until I had his horgel. Once I had that pink puffball safe in my arms, I felt sorry for him and carted him up to his shockcouch where I patched up his injuries as best I could. But I didn't give up the horgel.

Peculiarly enough, none of the others seemed the least shocked at what I had done. As long as it was for a horgel, and since the horgel wasn't theirs, it was all right. But as Smitty improved, I began to fear that he would try to take it back, and that, I swore grimly, would never happen. The pet I had stolen was just as precious as the one I had lost,—and I wouldn't trade the world for it. It was my joy and pleasure, and I guarded it fiercely from harm.

I couldn't forget Katy and her hatred for the creatures, and that cat was still loose, roaming somewhere through the ship looking for more horgels to kill. But I didn't search for her. I wasn't going to take any chances on losing my pet. Instead I stayed in the open where it was safe,—and carried the wrench with which I'd nearly b r a i n e d Smitty. It wasn't for Katy alone. I was equally afraid that Smitty would try to take the horgel back from me once he recovered.

But I needn't have wasted the energy. As the days passed and there was no sign of Katy, our vigilance relaxed, and the horgels didn't like to be held all the time. They were active little things who liked to romp.

So we finally gave in and allowed them the freedom of the control room, after searching it carefully, of course. There they would tumble and play with each other while we watched with fondly possessive eyes. Smitty looked at them from his shockcouch where he lay with his head bandaged,—and his eyes were murderous when he looked at me. I knew what was passing through his mind, and in a strange sort of way I sympathized with him, but a pet like the horgel was worth all the hate Smitty could generate. I felt good. I had a pet and he didn't.

IT was then that Katy struck! She must have been waiting with devilish patience for her opportunity, because when Mitsui opened the door to go aft to inspect the drives, she darted in.

A sweep of her claws disembowelled the closest of the fragile little creatures, and with a leap and pounce she seized the other in her jaws and disappeared down through the door in one of those long swift leaps that she had perfected on the outward voyage. It was done so swiftly that neither Slezak nor I had time to move. Mitsui had time only for a startled curse as Katy sailed down the shaft toward the stern with the heart-trending scream of the horgel following her. It died to a choked whimper as she disappeared.

We found the torn pink body in the drive room, a few minutes later but there was no sign of Katy.

But now instead of three horgels and four men, there was one horgel and four men.

Slezak and I stood it for a week until we made an agreement based on desperation and loss. We would take the last horgel from Mitsui and share it between ourselves. If we had to kill Mitsui to get it, well,—that was his bad luck.

We shook hands on it, but I knew from the look in his eye that he didn't intend to keep his promise. I had enough of broken promises,—so I decided to kill him after we had disposed of Mitsui. Then I would kill Smitty and have the delightful creature all to myself without any one to bother my enjoyment. And I'd never give Katy another chance.

It was all perfectly logical. After all, there was only one horgel and it should belong to the one who could best take care of it. I was obviously the one since I had lost two already and was fully conscious of the menace Katy represented.

But it was hard to catch Mitsui off guard. He went around with the horgel buttoned under his jacket and a loaded pistol in his pocket. Apparently he'd smuggled the gun aboard in defiance of the regulation which prohibited side-

arms aboard ship. He said it was for Katy, but Slezak and I knew better. We knew the gun was for us if we tried to take the horgel from him. It made us cautious.

Much as we wanted that loveable little creature, we didn't want to die for it. There could be no enjoyment of its charm if we were dead. And we couldn't carry rifles. Even if we could have stood up to their recoil in one eighth G, they were too big and clumsy to carry in the cramped quarter of the ship.

It was a weird situation, one that might have been laughable except for its deadly undertones. Smitty recovered enough to walk around and naturally joined forces with us have-nots. He was still pretty weak, but any help lessened the odds. However I was always conscious of the speculative look in his eye when he looked at me.

I would have to get rid of Smitty permanently after we had gotten Mitsui's pet or he would join forces with Slezak to murder me. I caught them whispering together once or twice, and the guilty looks they gave me were enough proof of their intentions. But none of us wanted to brave Mitsui's gun.

IT stayed that way for nearly a week. We were just entering Earth's atmosphere, and Mitsui was busy with the engines when we made our bid. I jumped him from behind, while Slezak and Smith took him from the side.

But I had forgotten that a Jap knows jiu jitsu like we know boxing. He bent,—and suddenly I was flying over his head. I landed with a thump that knocked the breath out of me. I was sick and paralyzed with the shock, but I saw with satisfaction that Slezak had gotten the engineer's gun.

But Mitsui wasn't through yet. He caught Smith with a judo blow that almost tore his head off, and turned on Slezak, a squatty bronze fury with death in his hands. Slezak didn't even have time to raise the gun.

But the fight had ripped Mitsui's jacket open and the horgel fell from the torn cloth. With a howl of terror, Mitsui

bent to pick up the pink furred creature. Slezak's gunbarrel landed on the back of his head with crushing force before any of us saw what had caused him to cry out. And Katy leaped from behind a motor mount, snatched the horgel from Archie's clutching hands and killed it with one quick bite!

Completely disregarding Slezak's anguished cry, she clawed and ripped the thing to bloody ribbons, and then arched her back and spat at him as if to say "well, I've killed the last of the little monsters,—now what are you going to do about it?"

Slezak bent over and picked the cat up almost tenderly, turned,—and smashed her head against the bulkhead with a full armed blow that would have killed a horse! Then he got down on his knees and picked at the bloody shreds of the horgel and cried like a baby!

SOMEHOW or other we managed to get the ship down, but when the reception committee met us, their congratulations turned to stares of horror. Of course they found out what happened, and the next expedition to Venus instead of carrying explorers carried cats,—a couple of hundred of them. The ship marked the landing site carefully, released the cats and came home. After that we sent exploration parties,— and we've been operating like that ever since. It's been better than forty years now that we've been trying to clean up that planet,—and we're obviously not through yet."

"Did you ever go back to Venus to see what your cats have done?" Farnsworth asked.

Thompson shook his head. "No," he admitted. "I never returned. I didn't have the heart to," he added. "I like horgels too. But as long as I'm a few million miles away, it isn't so bad. I can even be philosophical about it. But up there, feeling as I feel and knowing what I know it'd drive me mad!

Incidentally, Farnsworth, that's the r e a s o n you're grounded. Now that you know that we are methodically exterminating the horgels, Venus is no longer a safe place for you

to be. The Government, strangely enough, worries about the welfare of its citizens, and has no desire to see him in physical or mental danger when it isn't necessary. Since you've already held one of the horgels, you're no longer a safe risk. You're conditioned!"

Farnsworth's protest was ignored as Thompson swept on, speaking rapidly to forestall any possible interruption. "You see, the smart boys found out what the trouble was. Horgels are a menace. We never looked at them the right way. Instead of us owning the horgels, it was the other way around.—and they were greedy. They didn't want one man, they wanted all men! On Earth, an animal like that would be more disruptive than the Atom War. What that last one on the ship did to us was only a small sample of what they could do here if given a chance." Thompson shivered. "We missed that only because of Katy."

"But why did the cat hate them so?" Farnsworth asked curiously.

Thompson sighed and rose to his feet, dislodging Cato who jumped lithely to the floor. voicing his disapproval. He looked down at the cat and smiled. "You may think you own me, old boy,—but what you think and what I think are two different things." He faced Farnsworth and answered slowly. "As regards your question, there are two possible answers. The biologists say its because of the horgel's body odor,—it's sort of the reverse of catnip in its effect. But I think they're wrong. I think it's more basic than that. You see, like I said, you don't own a cat. The cat owns you,—and those things were cutting in,—violating Katy's prior rights. Katy had been queen of the ship, and she couldn't stand competition,—for which the human race should be forever grateful."

THE END

COSMIC RAYS AND THE SHAPE OF OUR GALAXY

by NORRIS LITTLE

The galaxy to which our solar system belongs may be of a shape entirely different from that previously envisioned by astronomers. A group of M.I.T. scientists reached this conclusion after study of a recent cosmic ray shower of an "almost incredible" intensity 10,000 times greater than normal.

The scientists detected the huge shower by setting out eleven big tubs over a land area of more than fifty acres at the Harvard University observatory. In each tub was a three-inch thick disk of plastic that emitted bright flashes of light whenever electron showers passed through it. Electronic recorders counted the light flashes.

These electron showers are produced when cosmic rays from space enter the earth's atmosphere; they travel with an energy of nearly ten billion billion electron volts. Cosmic ray showers go on all the time; scientists estimate one passes through your house at least once an hour.

But the storm detected by the M.I.T. scientists was of such magnitude that the entire body of data on cosmic rays will have to be restudied. Said M.I.T. physicist Dr. Bruno Rossi: "These results point to the necessity for a drastic revision of previous ideas concerning the origin of cosmic rays and possibly the condition of intergalactic space. They may even mean that our concept of the size and shape of our galaxy is wrong."

MISFIT

by ROBERT SILVERBERG

illustrated by BOWMAN

The pull of a high gravity planet can do some strange things to a man's insides, unless he has been adapted to it. Foss wasn't adapted, but he had to do his task

FOSS stood outside the Colony Officer's shack, feeling the tremendous drag of the alien world's gravity tugging at his bones. He tried to keep himself from slouching, but it was hard. On an Earth-type world, his lean body carried 170 pounds; here on Sandoval IX he weighed 306. That sort of drag could do things to a man's insides fast.

A little knot of Adapted Men clustered across the wide street, grinning mockingly at him. Low-slung, broad-beamed, they weren't bothered by the 1.8 grav of Sandoval IX. They had been bred for it; they thrived here. And they were openly enjoying Foss' discomfort.

He knocked again.

Nothing but silence followed. Foss turned away from the door and glared at the watching Adaptos. "Hey—you! Where's Haldane? I want to see him."

After a pause one of them said lazily, "He's in there, Earthman. Just keep knockin'. He'll hear you sooner or later, I guess." He burst into uproarious laughter. Angrily, Foss pounded on the Colony Officer's door with both fists. Lifting his arms was agonizing; it was like raising them through a fog of molasses.

This time the door was opened. Colony Officer Haldane appeared, a dark scowl on his wide leathery face. Like

all of the Adapted Men on Sandoval IX, Haldane was short—no more than five-four or so—with tremendous girth through the shoulders and hips. His neck was a thick pillar; his thighs must have been immense. His type had been genetically engineered for worlds like Sandoval IX.

"Yes?" he asked, in a deep, rumbling voice. "You new here, Earthman? Don't remember seeing your face around here before."

"I just got here," Foss said. He pointed to the field behind him, where the slim golden column of his two-man ship rested. "Came in from Egri V. I'm looking for someone here. Maybe you can help me."

"That's doubtful. We don't run a lost-and-found for Earthmen here, you know."

Foss felt sweat rolling down his face. Sandoval IX was a hot world as well as a heavy one.

"All I want is some information," he said tightly. "Just information. I'm not asking for any help."

The Adapted Man shrugged easily. "You wouldn't *get* any help, whether you asked for it or not. *Earthman.*"

"I said I wouldn't ask," Foss snapped.

"Okay. Come on inside and I'll hear you out, I guess."

THERE was a woman inside, immensely broad through the hips, big-breasted and flat-faced. To Foss she was repugnant-looking, but Adapted Men had different standards of beauty. She was ideally designed for childbearing on a heavy-gravity planet, and judging from the two stocky children playing on the floor, she had already made a good start.

"My wife," Haldane grunted as he led Foss past. "And my children."

Foss smiled mechanically and kept going. They turned into a small, shabby room that was probably the Adapted Man's study. Haldane dropped ponderously into a vast pneumochair, and didn't bother to gesture to Foss to sit. Foss sat anyway, in a smaller chair that looked sturdy enough to hold an elephant. He took a sharp breath as the gravity-strain on his heart was suddenly eased.

"What's your name and what do you want here?" Haldane asked.

"My name is Web Foss. I'm an Earthman attached to the Civil Government on Egri V. Two weeks ago my wife...ran away. She came here. I want to bring her back."

"How do you know she came here?"

"I know. Don't worry about that. I thought you might be able to help me find her."

"Me?" Haldane asked with just a mere local official. She might be anywhere at all on Sandoval IX. There are more than twenty colonies on this planet, you know."

"Twenty's not very many," Foss said. "I'll search them all if I have to."

A smile creased Haldane's bleak face. With elaborate lack of courtesy he drew a bottle from his desk, poured himself a drink, and replaced the bottle without offering it to Foss. He sipped slowly, ignoring the Earthman. At length he said, "You know, Mr. Foss, Earthmen aren't very popular on the Adapted Worlds. We don't get very good treatment when we visit the—ah—Normal Worlds. Cheap hotels, second-rate transportation, sly snickers, that sort of thing. 'Look at the Adapted Man—isn't he funny?' You know what I'm talking about?"

"I know. I can't help what ignorant people say or do. They don't understand that the Adapted Men are just as human as anyone else. that without them many planets couldn't have been settled. But—"

"Spare me the sermon," Haldane said. "The fact still remains that we were bred from Earth stock and now get treated as something not quite human. Dammit, we *are* human—and better than damned soft Earthmen who'd be dead in a year on a planet like this!"

"It's not a matter of better or worse," Foss said. "On a heavy-grav planet like this, you're better suited than we are. After all, you've been Adapted for it. On an Earth-norm world, it's the other way around. It's all relative. But my wife—"

"Your wife's here. She's not in this particular colony, but she's on Sandoval IX."

"Where?"

"That's your problem, Mr. Foss."

Foss rose, fighting the gravity every inch of the way. "You know where she is. Why won't you tell me?"

"You're an Earthman," Haldane said quietly. "A superior being. Go find her by yourself."

WITHOUT a word, Foss turned and left the Colony Officer's study, made his way through the dark cluttered hallway, past the children and their mother, out into the street. He kept stiffly erect, resisting the temptation to shuffle. That would be simpler, easier on his straining thigh-muscles, but he forced himself to walk springingly as if the gravity were Earth-norm instead of 1.8.

He hadn't expected much better treatment from Haldane. It was rare for an Adapted Man to even the score with an Earthman; usually it was a confused and bewildered Adapto on an Earth-norm world who met only laughter as he struggled to cope with a light grav pull or with an atmosphere so rich in oxygen that it left him half-drunk. Some of the Adaptos were bred to survive in an atmosphere only eight or ten percent oxygen; when they hit the 20% of an Earth-norm world, they spent their time on a continous oxygen jag.

The shoe was on the other foot now, and the Adaptos enjoyed the feeling. An Earthman had ventured into an Adapted World, reversing the usual pattern. They weren't going to go out of their way to make things easy for him.

But Carol was here...somewhere. He'd find her.

Somehow.

He stepped out into the street. The little cluster of Adaptos was still there. Foss crossed the street and headed toward them.

The group broke up as he got there. They melted away in six directions, as if they didn't want anything to do with the lean, hard-faced Earthman.

"Hold it," Foss said. "I want to talk to you."

They kept moving, strolling casually away.

"Hold it!"

He sprang forward and grabbed an Adapto by his open collar. He was almost a foot taller than the man. "I asked you to wait a minute. I want to talk to you."

"Let go of me, Earthman."

"I said I wanted to talk to you."

The Adapto jerked himself out of Foss' grasp and hit him. Foss saw the punch coming,

lifting from the hip and heading for his jaw, but there was absolutely nothing he could do about it. His gravity-prisoned body simply would not react as it had been trained to do. He made a single ineffectual attempt at ducking, and then the Adapto's fist cracked into the side of his face.

He hit the ground with astonishing speed. Crack—*boom!* He had gone over like a skulled tenpin. After a moment he felt his jaw tentatively; it still seemed to be in one piece He realized the Adapto had merely tapped him; an unpulled punch would probably have been fatal.

Foss got up, slowly. The Adepto stood his ground, legs spread belligerently.

"Want another?"

"One's enough," Foss said. His jaw felt numb. "I just wanted to ask you something."

The Adapto sauntered away, down the empty street. Foss watched him go. It had been a mistake to attempt the use of force; even the weakest of these colonists could flatten him with a slap, and Foss was no weakling himself.

This wasn't his world, though, It belonged to the Adaptos, and he was a misfit here—a man for whom walking and breathing were constant problems, not second nature. He looked up at the warm blueness of distant Sandoval, and scowled. It was hard to blame the Adaptos.

The offspring of men, they were objects of ridicule when they went among the so-called Normals. They were simply getting even, now.

He balled his fists angrily. *I'll show them,* he thought. *I'll find Carol—without their help.*

HE took a couple of steps down the broad street, knowing that if he stood still long enough his muscles would tighten and become useless.

The settlement had a rough, half-finished look. It was only three generations since the Adapted Man program had got under way, and Sandoval IV had been settled less than a decade before by a pilot group tailored to withstand its heat, humidity, atmospheric make-up, and gravity. There were perhaps ten thousand Adaptos here now, in twenty colonies scattered over the planet's face. In time they would spread and populate the entire world. In time.

And a few centuries hence mankind would spread from one end of the galaxy to the other— with even the most forbidding worlds inhabited by beings that could be called human.

Foss took a heavy step. He was thinking of Carol—of Carol, and of that last quarrel back on Egri V. He hardly remembered how it had started, by now—but he would never forget how it had finished.

Would never forget the bright anger in Carol's eyes as she said, "I've had enough, Web. Of you and of this planet. I'm leaving tonight."

He hadn't believed her. Not until he discovered she'd withdrawn half of their joint savings account and vanished. There weren't any scheduled flights out of Egri V for three weeks, and for a while he had hoped she was still somewhere on the planet.

Until he found out she'd hired a private courier to drop her off at his next port of call. Foss had spoken to the courier.

"You took her to Sandoval IX?"

"That's right."

"But that's an **Adapted** World. She couldn't last long there!"

The courier shrugged. "She wanted to get off Egri V in a hurry. I told her where I was going, and she paid me. No questions asked. I dropped her off there on my supply route last week."

"Okay," Foss had said. "Thanks."

And then he had borrowed the two-man ship from the Ministry, and gone after her. Carol wasn't the pioneer type; she wouldn't have gone to Sandoval IX if she knew what sort of world it was. It had been a wild, desperate move, and one she no doubt regretted by this time.

He reached a street corner and paused. The blocky figure of an Adapto was coming toward him.

"You the Earthman who's looking for his woman?"

"That's right," Foss said.

"She's in the next settlement. Ten miles west of here, roughly. I saw her last time I made a trip over that way, four-five days ago."

Foss blinked in surprise. "You're telling me the truth, aren't you?"

The Adapto spat. "I wouldn't lie to an Earthman."

"How come you're telling me? I thought none of you

meant to help me at all."

The Adapto's deepset black eyes met his. Slowly he said, "We were just talkin' about it. We figure it's simpler to tell you where she is. That way you won't be mousin' around here botherin' us all the time. Go after your woman, friend. We don't want you here. An Earthman smells up the air. He louses up the crops."

Foss licked his lips tensely, holding back his temper. "Okay," he said. "I won't inflict my presence on you any more than I have to. Ten miles west, you say?"

"Yeah."

"I'm on my way," Foss said. He thought for a moment: there wasn't much fuel left in the two-man ship, and a heavy world like Sandoval IX had a high escape velocity. He could get to the next settlement by blasting off, orbiting, and making a new landing ten miles westward, but that would consume a tremendous amount of reaction mass; quite probably, he wouldn't be able to make a second blastoff later, after he'd found Carol. He would have to leave the ship here, and find some other way of covering the ten miles.

He pulled out his wallet. "I'd like to rent a landcar from you, if you've got one. I won't need it more than an hour or so. Is it worth ten credits to you?"

"No."

Foss cursed silently, "Fifteen?"

"Save your breath, friend. My car isn't for rent at any price."

"A hundred," Foss said desperately.

"I said save your breath."

"If you won't rent me a car, someone else will." He stepped around the Adapto and headed down the street, moving as fast as was possible.

"You can save your energy too," the Adapto called after him. "You'll need it for the hike."

"Huh?"

He turned. The Adapto was smiling scornfully at him. "Nobody's going to rent you a car, friend. Fuel's too precious here to waste on you. It's only ten miles. Let's see you walk it, Earthman."

ONLY ten miles. Let's see you walk it.

Foss heard the words over and over again. He entered a bar further down the street.

Ten or twelve Adaptos were there, drinking. They looked up coldly as he came through the photon-barrier.

"We don't serve Earthmen here," the bartender said. "This is a restricted bar. Locals only."

Foss glowered at him. "I didn't come in here to drink." He looked around. "I want to rent a landcar," he said loudly. "My wife's in the next settlement. I want to go get her. Who'll rent me his car for an hour?"

No response. Foss drew a hundred-credit bill from his wallet. "I'll put a hundred credits on the line for somebody's car. Any takers?"

The bartender said, "This is a drinkin' place, Earthman, not a public square. You want to transact business, transact it outside."

Foss ignored that. "Well? A hundred credits?"

Someone at the bar chuckled. "Put your money away, Earthman. We're not goin' to rent you anything. It's only ten miles. Start walking."

Foss was silent a moment. *Only ten miles.* For an Adapto, that was an afternoon's invigorating hike. For an Earthman, it might mean a day or more of weary leg-dragging. They were daring him to do it. They wanted to see him die trying.

Well, he wouldn't give them the satisfaction.

"Okay," he said softly. "I'm going to walk there, and I'm going to walk back. And tomorrow I'll be back here to show you that an Earthman can do it."

They turned away. No one was looking at him.

"I'll be back," Foss said.

He left the bar and headed across the field toward his ship. His muscles ached; his heart was throbbing wearily from the exertion needed to pump almost twice as hard. Earth-norm people weren't meant for Sandoval IX. A few weeks or maybe a month or two in this kind of grav and the tired heart would give out completely.

His throat was dry and his eyes were tearing by the time he reached the cabin of the ship. He assembled a lightweight survival kit—compass, drink-flask, food tabs, saline drops, other essentials. He strapped the pack to his back. It was a five-pound kit, the sort of burden a man would hardly notice ordinarily. Here

it weighed nine pounds, and Foss knew it would seem a lot heavier than that before he was through walking.

He stopped for a moment to rest in the acceleration cradle. Then, relentlessly, he dragged himself to his feet and clambered down out of the ship, taking every step of the catwalk carefully instead of jumping as he usually did. A jump here might snap his ankles.

The afternoon sun was high overhead. *Ten miles,* he thought. How long would it take to walk ten miles? It was 1300 now; if he covered only two miles an hour, he'd be there before nightfall.

A watching group of Adaptos called something to him as he started out. He couldn't hear what it was, but he was willing to bet it wasn't any sort of encouragement.

THE land spread out broad and flat before him as he walked; it was good farm-land, rolling and brown, sun-warmed, fertile. Far off in the distance rugged steep hills, not quite steep enough to be mountains, formed a backdrop. The air was warm. A brown dirt road wound through the farmland, leading on to the next settlement, where Carol was.

It was lovely country. It was too good a world to allow it to go to waste, which was why men had been Adapted to live on it. But Foss did not belong in the landscape scene, and he knew it.

He pulled himself along. Muscles designed to support a man of 170 pounds groaned under the burden of 306; ligaments complained. He felt mountainous, gross, impossibly heavy and impossibly weak. Torrents of sweat drenched his body.

After a while he stopped and cut a walking stick from a tree at the side of the road. Pulling the living limb from the tree required fearful effort; he was gasping and wheezing by the time he had done it. He moved on, shoving himself forward with jabs of the stick.

He had covered two and a half miles by the end of the first hour. That was a little better than schedule, but the effort left him limp. He didn't do quite so well during the second hour; the pedometer he was carrying showed that he was now only four miles out, plus two hundred yards. His pace was slackening.

Six miles to go—

He shambled on mechanically, not worrying now about his posture, not worrying about anything but the sheer one-foot-after-another plodding that would bring him to his goal.

Every step will bring me nearer, he thought. He made a little chant of it: *EVry STEP will BRING me NEARer,* taking a step forward on each accented syllable. *EVry STEP will BRING me NEARer,* over and over, until it began to drag out ... EVry...STEP will ... BRING me... NEARer,with longer and longer intervals between the beat.

Finally he sank into a little heap on the side of the road and rested. His breath came short. His heart thudded so hard that he shook with each pulsation. Then he thought of the mocking Adaptos waiting somewhere behind him—possibly trailing him, waiting for the moment he dropped of exhaustion. He levered up off his walking stick and kept going. *..What's 1.8 grav?* he asked himself. *Hell, I stand up to five and six gravs all the time in a spaceship.*

..Yeah. For ten seconds at a time, he answered himself.

He checked his watch, then the pedometer. The digits swam. He was now three and a half hours out of the colony, and had covered a little better than five miles. He was falling further and further behind schedule.

EVry ... STEP will... BRING me ... NEARer...

He dragged his left leg forward, planted it on the ground, swung the right one up past it, then the left, the right...

He lost track of the time, of the distance, of everything. He looked at the dial every now and then, but it made no sense. From time to time, when he remembered about it, he took a tablet from his kit and swallowed it. That gave him the energy to go on a little further, and yet a little further.

The sky darkened as the sun dropped out of sight. The warmth of the day trickled off into space. Foss kept moving. *Only ten miles. Let's see you walk it.*

Houses came into sight. Streets. People.

No, not people. Adaptos, short, squat, grotesque. Foss found himself looking down at a leathery brown face. He leaned forward on the walking-

stick, trying to catch his breath.

"I'm Web Foss," he said. "I'm looking for an Earthwoman. Mrs. Carol Foss. Is she here?"

For one wild dizzy moment he thought the Adapto might sneer and tell him that he'd simply travelled in a wide circle, that he was back in the same settlement from which he'd started out so long ago.

The Adapto nodded gravely. "The Earthwoman is here, with us. I'll take you to see her."

"You're not joking, now. She's really here?"

"Of course," the Adapto said impatiently. Foss noticed him staring strangely at him. "Where's your ship?" he asked.

"Ten miles the other way. I walked here."

"You—*walked*?" the Adapto said.

Foss nodded. "Take me to my wife, will you?" The fatigue of the trip seemed to wash away. For the first time in hours, he stood up straight.

THEY had put Carol in a dark back room of one of the settlement houses. As Foss entered, he saw her lying asleep on a crude pallet. The room was windowless; the air was stale and offensive. Three empty bottles of liquor lay on their sides near the bed: two gin, one some local brew. The room looked dismal.

He approached the bed and looked at his wife.

The gravitational pull did strange things to her face; it tighened the jaw muscles, made the lips rubbery and down-drooping, imparted an idiot sag to the eyelids. She looked as if she had lost twenty pounds; her face was harshly angular and almost skull-like.

"My God," he said out loud. "Is that what a human being looks like after two weeks here?"

She stirred. Foss turned and saw two Adaptos standing curiously behind him.

"Get out of here," he said. "Leave us alone."

"*Web*," she murmured. "*Web*..."

She hadn't opened her eyes yet.

Foss leaned close over her and with trembling fingers touched her cheek. The skin was dry and flakey. "Wake up, Carol. Wake up."

She opened her eyes hesi-

tantly—then, seeing him, sat half-upright in bed, sinking back again after a moment. "Web," she said.

"I got here this morning. The courier told me where you had been dropped off, and I figured I'd better come get you. This isn't the sort of world you would be likely to enjoy on a permanent basis."

She sat up again, with a resolute effort. "It's been hell. As soon as I felt the grav I knew I couldn't stay here...But that courier was gone, and there was no way I could get in touch. And the Adaptos weren't very helpful."

"At least they gave you a place to stay. I didn't even rate that."

"It was like a nightmare—trying to walk against that gravity." She shuddered. "I couldn't go more than ten or twenty steps without falling down. And the Adaptos—they just stood around and laughed, for the first couple of hours. Then I collapsed, and after that they were a little more decent. I had a little money; they brought me liquor, and I drank...it was the only way I could...could stop feeling the drag this place has!"

Foss held her wrist. It was almost cold.

"I guess I've been here a week or two," she went on. "I sleep most of the time. They feed me, a little. They treat me the way they would some animal that was sick. Web?"

"Eh?"

"Web, can we go home? Both of us?"

"That's why I came here, Carol."

She shook her head. "I was an idiot...running away like that, coming here. But I got my reward, I guess."

"We'll leave tomorrow," he said. "I have a ship." *Ten miles away*, he added silently.

She was staring at him. "Look at yourself in the mirror," she said suddenly. "Over there."

Foss rose, crossed the room, looked at his image. Even in the dim light, the sight rocked him. The face was that of a skeleton — a stubble-bearded skeleton with staring eyes, pale, gaunt cheeks bloodless lips. That ten-mile trip had left its mark. He looked like his own ghost.

He managed to chuckle. "Pretty awful, isn't it? You're no better. But we can fatten

up again when we're back on Egri V."

"Come here. Sit down next to me."

He cautiously lowered himself to the edge of the bed. He wriggled out of his kit-pack and stretched out next to her, feeling sick with fatigue. Seconds later, he was asleep.

ONLY ten miles. Let's see you walk it.

Ten miles there, ten miles back. And for the second ten-mile hitch he not only had to drag his own feet along, he had to support Carol.

The sun was blazingly warm when they set out, and grew warmer through the day. They talked incessantly, desperately, turning themselves into automata that marched on, on, without paying attention to the passing of the hours or the extent of road still ahead.

"We're lucky," Foss said after a while. "I put the ship down any old place. I could have landed it twenty miles away. Or two hundred. It's only ten."

"*Only* ten," Carol said.

"Only ten."

They rested frequently. Foss found himself growing oddly stronger as the day went on, as if his body were adjusting—*adapting*—itself to the increased pull of gravity, getting used to the drag exerted on it. He knew that was just illusion, of course; still, it was less of an effort than it had been on the way out.

The sun blazed down. Somewhere ahead was the colony, and in the colony was Foss' ship.

Somewhere.

It was still daytime when they got there.

A welcoming committee of Adapted Men stood by the road as they came by. "Walk straight," Foss whispered. "Don't slouch. Pretend you were just out for an afternoon's stroll, nothing more."

"I'll try. It's hard, though."

"You have to do it. Just for a few minutes—until we reach the ship."

He recognized a few faces. There was Colony Officer Haldane and his wife, and there the man who had knocked him down, and there some of the other jeerers. They were staring wordlessly at him.

"I came back," Foss said, when he was within speaking distance. "And I brought my wife."

"So I see," Haldane said coldly.

"I just thought I'd let you know I made it. I didn't want it to worry you."

"We weren't worried," Haldane said. "We didn't care."

But it was a lie, Foss knew. He could tell by the way their dark faces were scowling and their eyes glared that they *did* care.

They had sent the misfit into the desert to die, but he had come back alive. He had beaten them. One single Earthman.

"Excuse me," Foss said. "You're in my way. I want to get back to my ship."

But three of the Adaptos stood blocking the road, staring at him. He felt Carol's hand grip his arm more tightly. *No more trouble now,* he prayed.

Not now.

"Get out of my way," Foss said sharply. "Let me get past."

There was a moment of silence. Then Haldane said, "Get out of his way."

Sullenly, the three Adaptos gave way. Foss and Carol went past, on their way to the ship. He felt very tired, but he knew now there wouldn't be any further trouble.

He walked on about twenty paces. Then he stopped and looked back. They were all staring after him.

"Thanks for everything," he said, smiling. "All the kind help. But I managed without you, didn't I?"

His eyes met Haldane's—and Haldane looked away. That was what Foss had been waiting for. An Earthman had met an Adapto on the Adapto's home grounds, and the Earthman had won. Foss could see that in Haldane's eyes.

He boosted Carol up into the ship, and followed her in. Just before he slammed the hatch shut, he peered out at the group of Adaptos outside. They were staring at him incredulously, as if they couldn't believe he had actually returned alive.

He grinned at them. The next time an Earthman came here, they'd have a little more respect for him.

"So long," he yelled. Then he slammed the hatch, dogged it shut, and went inside to begin setting up the homeward orbit.

THE END

THE WEEGIL

by EVELYN E. SMITH

Nobody knew where the weegil came from, why it came or what it was made for. It was just a piece of furniture in the room — until one day something unusual happened

THE phone rang. Ellie ran to answer it, as she always did, welcoming this break in the monotony of her day. She skidded a little on the polished floor and murmured a word which she hoped her small, sharp-eared daughter would not catch.

Finally she got her hands on the receiver. "Mrs. Kinnan?" a male voice asked pleasantly. Undoubtedly he was going to try to sell her something.

"That's right," she agreed.

"This is the Abermuddy Quiz Show," he said—or something like that; he spoke so rapidly she couldn't quite catch the name of the program. "If you can answer this question correctly, you will win a valuable prize: 'Where are the United States?' "

"Why—er—" she hesitated, feeling f o o l i s h— "why, in North America. The Western Hemisphere. Is that what you mean?"

"Con-gratulations, Mrs. Kinnan," he replied warmly. "That is the right answer. Tomorrow morning you will receive your weegil."

"...And then he hung up before I could say anything," Ellie concluded, hanging her husband's coat in the closet.

Nick smiled. "It's a gag, hon," he said, rumpling the blonde curls that had spent all day in pins awaiting release on his arrival. "Tomorrow somebody'll come to sell you some kind of an electrical appliance or maybe want to take your picture. Don't you give anybody a cent, chicken. Tell 'em

I pay all the bills." He kissed her on the tip of her nose.

"Yes, Nick," Ellie promised sadly. She'd been looking forward to her weegil. She hadn't been able to understand quite what the man said, but she'd hoped a weegil would prove to be a washing machine. Or maybe a television set.

Naturally, she knew enough not to show her disappointment to Nick, but Sugarplum was less discreet. "Yarrr!" she shrieked. "I want a weegil. You *promised* we were going to have a weegil, Mom!"

Ellie could feel the hot redness rising in her face; she had always been bothered by a tendency to blush. Nick, she knew, thought it a charming, feminine trait. Now he looked at her with a tolerant grin. "You really fell for it, hug? You and the kid. Didn't it even occur to you that, if it was on the level, the question was too easy?"

Everyone knew, she thought, that they asked ridiculously easy questions on those quiz programs just to trap you. But she wasn't going to start an argument.

Nick made a clicking noise with his tongue. "Women!" he said. "Suckers!... But they're such cute little critters you can't help loving 'em. C'mere and kiss me, chicken."

She obeyed. It was silly to make a scene; she probably *had* acted like a fool. Only... there was no point to making Swedish meatballs for Nick's dinner, even if he did like them so much. Hamburger was just as nutritious and a lot easier to prepare. Lucky she'd been so excited over the weegil she'd forgotten to start the meatballs.

A bit after ten the next morning, a truck drove up in front of the little white house flanked on either side by little white houses exactly like it, even to the amount of unpaid mortgage. Ellie and Sugarplum watched from behind the curtains, breathing heavily, as a large man lifted out a rectangular, obviously weighty, package. He carried it up the Kinnan walk. He deposited it on the Kinnan doorstep.

"Mommy!" Sugarplum shrieked, almost yanking off Ellie's skirt in an ecstacy of delight. All of Ellie's dresses had

a tendency to sag on one side as a result of her daughter's uncontrollable emotions. "It's the weegil! It's come!"

"Keep quiet, Sugar," Ellie said absently, her blue eyes rapt on the package. Wouldn't it be wonderful if Nick were wrong and the weegil were really hers...something she had won, earned for herself by herself? But Nick probably was right—he always was.

"They're most likely going to try to get me to buy whatever it is," she said aloud resolutely. "I must be firm."

The doorbell rang. Ellie took off her apron, smoothed her hair with the palms of her hands, and opened the door.

"Mrs. Kinnan?...Sign here, please."

"I'm not buying anything," she said stoutly. "Not a thing. So you can just take whatever it is away...."

"There's nothing to pay," protested the truckman. "You just sign to show you received it. It's yours free and clear."

"And then later it'll turn out I signed an agreement to pay ten dollars a month for the next twenty years," she retorted, the more vehemently because she was longing to know what was in the package. "Oh, I know all about these rackets. Take that thing away or I'll call the police!"

"Oh, Mommy, M o m m y!" Sugarplum wailed. "Don't!"

Ellie longed—not for the first time in the five years she had been a mother—to give the little one a good, unprogressive clout...but one didn't beat children; one reasoned with them—w h e t h e r they understood you or not. "Don't call them!" Sugarplum yelled. "I'll hold my breath if you do!"

"Lady," the man sighed wearily, "this thing belongs to you. I'm just delivering it. There is absolutely no money due. All you do is sign this receipt that shows you got the package okay. That's all it says—see, no fine print." He thrust the slip of paper in front of her face.

She retreated a step. "W-what's in the package?" she asked warily.

"How should I know. Lady, I was just hired to deliver it to you. I'm a working man; if you make me late for my other calls I'll get fired, and my wife'll

have to go to work to support me."

He paused and waited. Ellie did not smile.

"Now," he went on sulkily, "you sign here and I'll carry the thing into the house. Then you can take off the wrapping paper and find out what it is for yourself."

She knew she was a sucker, but she signed. There didn't seem to be anything else to do. Again it would be pointless to make a scene.

The man carried the package laboriously into the living room and set it against the stair wall. It would probably stay there if it were a television set. Of course, if it turned out to be a washing machine, it would have to be moved out into the kitchen. She could put it in that space between....

"Momma!" Sugarplum was jumping up and down with impatience. "Why don't you open it, huh, Mom? Hurry *up!*" She laid grimy hands on the package, ready to wrest forth its secrets herself.

"No, don't tear off the paper, dear," Ellie admonished, tearing the child away from the weegil. "It's very nice paper—I've never seen anything like it; it'll come in handy at Christmas. You know Daddy likes us to save things."

She began to unwrap the object carefully. The paper was unusual in texture as well as appearance; in fact, it didn't feel like paper, but what else could it have been? Neatly printed by hand in block letters were the words: "FRAGILE. HANDLE WITH CARE. THIS SIDE UP." It might prove to be one of those new small refrigerators—it was about the right size. Not that she needed another refrigerator, but one would be worth a couple of hundred dollars, enough to take care of at least two payments on the house.

She pulled off the last layer of paper. And there it was.

Only...what was it?

Sugarplum had no doubts. "It's a weegil!" she squealed. "It's a beautiful, lovely weegil!"

It certainly wasn't like anything Ellie had ever seen before. *Oblong* would come closest to describing its shape, but it wasn't really oblong. In color it was a cross between blue and green with undercurrents of

gold and silver and...gold and silver. Obviously it wasn't made out of metal, and yet she'd never seen any plastic like that either. Still, she didn't have much chance to keep up with the latest developments in synthetics. Perhaps some new material was being tested... but, still, they wouldn't send just a *shape* to her. It must be *something*.

A panel of some close-woven mesh in a lighter shade of the same blue-green seemed to indicate that it might be a television set, or a radio, after all —but there were no knobs, no controls of any kind, or, indeed any apparent way of opening it. There wasn't even so much as a seam or a sign of welding. Except for the panel, the thing was an unbroken whole. It might have been a piece of abstract sculpture, but she had a definite feeling that it had some utilitarian purpose; besides, she was pretty sure that artists didn't contribute samples of their work to quiz shows in return for free advertising.

She tried to move the object, but it was so heavy she could only tip it slightly. As it tipped, she thought she heard a faint gurgling inside, but she wasn't sure. When she tried to tip it again, it seemed to have grown heavier, for this time it refused to budge at all. Something about leverage, she thought vaguely.

But it was a pretty thing, very pretty indeed. It gave the very ordinary furniture an air of distinction.

"What does it do, Mom?" Sugarplum asked anxiously, running a sticky hand over the pleasingly smooth surface. Ellie fought the temptation to slap it off. "Well—I—it—you better ask your father when he comes home."

"Aaah, Daddy," Sugarplum pouted. "You know he doesn't know anything!"

"I wonder where she picked *that* up," Ellie thought, a little frightened.

NICK prodded the weegil with his forefinger. "I see they stuck you after all," he smiled. "I thought they would." He caught her lovingly in muscular arms; at college he had majored in football, and he still exercised every day, early in

the morning before he went to work, to retain his magnificent physique.

"But I understand, chicken; you can't be expected to cope with things like that. In a couple of days there'll be a guy around to show you how to work it and hand you a bill. Never mind, as long as we haven't used it, they can't can't charge us anything. You haven't plugged it in, have you hon?"

"Plugged *what* in?" Ellie demanded, with more asperity than the columnists recommend for girls who want to hold their husbands.

"You're right; there doesn't seem to be any connection," he admitted, after giving the weegil a closer inspection. "Funny thing. Guess it works on batteries. Or maybe they install it after the down payment. Oh, they're clever, those guys; I'll grant you that." he gave her the smile that had made her leave college in her junior year. "What's for dinner, hon?"

"Hamburgers," she said.

The weegil stayed in the Kinnan living room and nobody came to install it or service it or take it away. After a while, Ellie began to accept it as part of the furnishings. It was good-looking; it didn't take up much room; and Sugarplum liked to play with it—although Ellie couldn't figure out what interest she found in it. It never did anything and it was too big and heavy for the child to involve in any of her intricate and violent pastimes. But it kept Sugarplum quiet for hours on end, crooning to it, and for that reason alone, even Nick agreed, it was well worth the space it occupied.

Ellie grew fond of the object herself, dusting it more often than any of the other pieces of furniture and more carefully—although she was always a scrupulous housekeeper, for Nick was finicky about such things. Sometimes she even found herself talking to it, although there was nothing out of the way in this; she had found that inanimate objects made the safest confidants. And she had no one else to talk to, for Sugarplum was only five.

Sugarplum talked to the weegil too, Ellie noticed, which was all right. What was faintly disturbing was Sugarplum's al-

legation that the weegil talked to her. But this was also harmless, Ellie convinced herself. Children were always doing things like that; literature was full of invisible playmates and such. "Only, don't tell your father, dear," she made the child promise. "He'd be angry. He hasn't much imag-much of a sense of whimsy."

"He hasn't much of a sense of anything," Sugarplum said precociously. Ellie was dismayed. Nick wouldn't like it if Sugarplum turned out to be a prodigy after all; he wanted them to be just a happy, healthy, average American family like everybody else on the block.

THE weegil remained with the Kinnans six months, becoming as much a part of the family as the stove and the couch and the vacuum cleaner. Ellie ceased to wonder what it was and came to accept it as part of the normal order of things. Then one day she entered the living room, duster in hand, to find tears were streaking the dirt on Sugarplum's face. "What's the matter, honey?" she asked dutifully. "Tell Mommy."

Sugarplum looked up, her lower lip quivering. How ugly, Ellie thought, children—or adults, for that matter—looked when they cried. "The weegil," Sugarplum sobbed, "it says it's got to go home."

"Oh, *God!*" Ellie said to herself. "I should have put a stop to it at the beginning; that's what Nick's going to say." She stroked the child's tangled hair. "Now, darling," she said patiently, "you know the weegil can't *really* talk, so how could it tell you it wanted to go home?"

Wet eyes sizzled in a swollen red face. "Aah, you're just like Daddy!" Sugarplum snarled, so vehemently that Ellie jumped back.

She composed herself. After all, the child was smaller. "No, I'm not just like your Daddy." Sympathy first, and then—if that failed—the long-needed beating. "But I do understand what you mean. The weegil is a very pretty thing and sometimes when you're lonesome you *think* it talks to you. But it doesn't really. You see—"

"I beg your pardon," the

weegil interrupted apologetically, "but I'm afraid I do *talk*."

It had a slight foreign accent, but otherwise its English was perfectly idiomatic. The voice seemed to come from the mesh panel. That was it—an infernal machine! "You—you're a kind of radio, aren't you?" Ellie faltered. Which was silly, she realized the moment she'd said it.

"No," the weegil replied, "I am not a radio."

It paused. Ellie began to wonder hysterically whether this were going to turn into some kind of guessing game. Then it continued, "I'm an entity and I'm right here. Inside the weegil."

"You see, Mommy," Sugarplum said triumphantly, "next time you better believe what I say."

Ellie sank abruptly into an overstuffed chair. Wouldn't you know this would be just the day her hair was in an absolute mess? She fumbled with a curl. "What are you doing in the—weegil?"

"I live here. Temporarily, that is. I shouldn't care to take up residence permanently in such cramped quarters."

"Y—you mean you've been in there all along? All six months. Who—what are you? A midget?"

"I'm what you'd call an anthropologist," the weegil said. It had a soothing, syrupy tone of voice, like an expensive doctor's. "I'm studying your culture on a research grant. The competition was extraordinarily keen, but I won out on the basis of my record."

"How nice," Ellie murmured, not forgetting her manners even under the shock of knowing she had gone mad. For there was no sane reason why an anthropologist—e v e n a small one—should be studying her from a box in her living room.

"I'm sorry to have played a trick like this on you, but it was the only way I could manage," the voice went on. "You see, we're amphibians—have to live in a tank on this planet, so this is the only way we could study you Earthlings at ease in your native habitat. If you were aware of the fact that I was watching you, you wouldn't behave naturally—you *know* you wouldn't!"

"*Earthlings*," Ellie repeated weakly. A bobby pin fell to the floor unnoticed. "*Amphibians!* What do you mean? Where are you from? You mean you've been sitting inside that thing six months *taking notes on us?*"

"Oh, it wasn't too bad," the weegil's voice said bravely. "I've a good supply of food concentrates and atmosphere replenishers. I didn't suffer too much—amazing how efficient weegils really are. And you've been a most interesting study. I've begun to feel almost as if I know you, which I really do—if you don't mind my saying so."

"Not at all." Ellie giggled nervously. "I guess you do at that."

"As for where I come from," the weegil continued in smooth oratorical style, "it's the planet you call Venus. We've been studying Earth via your radio and television transmissions for some years, but finally we came to the point where we needed first-hand information to complete our accounts."

"Oh," Ellie said, "broadcasts. That's how you learned to speak such good English."

"It is rather good, isn't it?" the weegil agreed complacently. "They do say I have a flair for languages."

"And that's how you'd know about quiz shows...." Ellie murmured. Everything was fitting into place. She supposed the weegil, rather the—the person in the weegil, now wished to discuss his findings with her. It must have been pretty boring to spend six months in that tank with no one to talk to, but she understood—to have spoken to her before would have invalidated the experiment. Lucky the Venutian had selected someone who knew the importance of the scientific approach; anyone else might have been angry at being—used.

THERE was a sharp pull at her skirt. "Are you going to help, Mommy? Are you? Are you?"

"Shhhh," warned the Venutian, but it was too late.

"Then that's the only reason why you spoke to me!" Ellie exclaimed. "You found you needed help."

The voice seemed a trifle less self-confident. "Well...

yes," it admitted. "And I hoped I could approach *you*...."

"I'm afraid I'll have to consult my husband," Ellie said stiffly, "before I could—er—do anything for you, Mr.—ah—"

The voice sounded amused. "My name is Khardlan. And we don't use titles on Venus, but, if we did, it would be *Miss*. I am a female."

Ellie stopped tucking in stray wisps of hair and stared at the weegil. "But wasn't it an awfully dangerous trip for a woman—a female—to make? I wonder they let you."

Khardlan laughed. "My dear Mrs. Kinnan—or may I call you Ellie?—on Venus the females are the stronger sex.... As they are on Earth too, you know," she told the woman. "Muscular strength is of relatively little importance when weighed against survival value. However, on Venus we females are also physically the more forceful, which does help to keep the males constantly reminded of our importance in the survival of the species."

"I suppose," Ellie retorted defensively, "you don't have to bear children or you have them in incubators or something...?"

"We have them in very much the same manner as you do," Khardlan replied. "That is why we are logically the ruling sex; the future of our race is in our hands.... Oh, my dear," she went on, and her voice, inhuman and diluted through a tank as it was, throbbed with warm, womanly sympathy, "how can you stand it all?"

Ellie said nothing. "This'll cure me of talking to inaminate objects," she thought.

Khardlan didn't wait for an answer. "I do wish I could help you," she sighed, "but what could I do here, helpless in a tank, far away from my own world? Besides, I'm only a detached and impartial scientist, here to record and observe—nothing more. It would be violating scientific ethics to interfere."

"Of course," Ellie said, scientifically, and wondering at the same time just what it was Khardlan thought she could do, if her hands—that is, her tentacles—her appendages—were not tied.

"However, when I go back

and present my data, I'm sure our rulers will not let this situation continue to exist. After all, we may be Venutians and you Earthlings, but females should stick together!"

"Well, how do you intend to get back, then?" Ellie asked with brisk competence. "And what can I do?"

"There's a—you would call it a spaceship waiting for me," Khardlan explained. "However, I can't get to it alone; that's the one thing I couldn't arrange in advance, since I didn't know how long my studies would take. As a matter of fact, I did stay much longer than I had planned—you proved to be so much more complex than I had anticipated. Actually, my work is far from complete, but I got homesick—I'm sure you understand."

"Oh, I do," Ellie said. "How can I help you?"

"If you'd just telephone the trucking company and ask them to come pick me up, everything else has been worked out. I have a genius for detail."

"Will the truckman be able to pick you up?" Ellie asked, somewhat disappointed at the smallness of her role. "That's one of the things that bothered me. The man who brought you seemed to carry you easily enough, but I couldn't even move you—and neither could Nick, although he's very strong."

"When the time comes, I'll lessen the weegil's gravity," Khardlan explained. "I increased it when I was delivered here so it would get so heavy you'd never be able to move it. It makes me—er—seasick when the weegil is pushed about, although I have to put up with a certain amount of visceral discomfort during installation and removal. A scientist's life is not an easy one."

"No, I imagine not," Ellie agreed.

"Now, if you'd be good enough to telephone this number...."

IT was so simple; even Nick would hardly object if he knew. Then a monstrous suspicion entered Ellie's mind. "But Sugarplum could have done that! How come....?"

"I *did* try, Mommy!" Sugarplum wailed. "But the man

wouldn't believe me. He said, 'Ask your Mommy to call us, little girl.' "

The weegil made a noise something like a human being clearing his—or her—throat. "Well...we must trust as few people as possible, you understand. Security reasons."

"I think I understand a lot more than you mean me to!" Ellie retorted indignantly. "You have other Earth contacts! You must have. The man who said he was from the quiz program—he must have been a human being. He couldn't have telephoned from inside a tank or he'd have sounded all gurgly and sloshy like you. Besides, how would he get at the receiver?"

" 'Gurgly and sloshy,' eh?" Khardlan repeated. "I must do something about that. Oh, contacts—we do have a few Earth contacts," she admitted, "obtained by radio. We can transmit as well as receive, of course. And we should love to have more contacts, many more but...oh, my dear," she sobbed, "you don't know... what it's like...to be alone and helpless on an alien planet... confined to a t-tank...not knowing whom you can trust...."

Ellie just managed to keep from bursting into tears of sympathy. "I'm sorry," she said in a broken voice. "I really am." She ran her hand along the top of the weegil, although that was silly; it was like petting an automobile in order to soothe the driver. "I—I think I can imagine a little of what you must feel. I'll call the truckers right away."

"Th-thank you," Khardlan said. "I—I'll never forget your kindness as long as I live, and that'll be a thousand of your Earth years. Even when I'm back home I'll think of you frequently, with gratitude."

"Won't I ever see you again, Khardlan?" howled Sugarplum, thrusting herself back into the discussion. Not never ever? Couldn't Momma and I visit you on Venus?"

"Then we'd have to live in weegils of our own," Ellie deduced. "Wouldn't we, Khardlan?" Something was bothering her, some question she knew she should put to the Venutian, but which she couldn't pin down.

"I'm afraid so," the extra-

terrestrial agreed. "You wouldn't like it on Venus, Sugarplum; you'd find it much too hot and damp.... But, don't worry, things are going to be much better on Earth for you—for both of you—very soon.... Now, Ellie, if you'll call this number...."

"HEY, there's something missing!" Nick complained as he breezed into the house and gaily pinched his wife under the pretext of handing her his coat. "Aah, don't be a sorehead, baby!" he replied to her indignant shriek. He gave the room a comprehensive glance. "I know what's gone—it's the weegil! What happened to it?"

Ellie smiled, a secret smile. "They took it away," she said. "You were so right, dear. They thought they'd stimulate our curiosity and then show us how it worked if we bought it. But there was some kind of slip-up at the office and they left it here longer than they were supposed to.... But I told the salesman I wouldn't pay a penny, and so he took it away."

"Good for you, chick," he said, slapping her affectionately. "I'm glad you had that much sense. What did I tell you; you don't ever get something for nothing.... Didn't your mother ever warn you, you mustn't believe what strange men say?—even over the phone."

That was what had been nagging her, Ellie suddenly realized. The voice of Khardlan's contact on the telephone had been a man's. Yet Khardlan had secured Ellie's support on a basis of common femininity. How had the Venutian convinced the man? What had she told *him*?

Come to think of it, how did Ellie actually know Khardlan was female at all? The only evidence she had was the creature's word: she had never seen the Venutian and, even if she had, she probably wouldn't have been able to tell.

It was just the sort of dirty trick a man would play.

THE END

SCIENCE SHORTS

by EDGAR P. STRAUS

Space flights to Mars and Venus may be effected by use of the moon as a "gravitational whip," according to a suggestion from rocket expert Krafft A. Ehricke. Such a maneuver could save the rocket a great deal of fuel—but, he warned, even the slightest error in computation might send the vessel hopelessly off course.

The rocket would follow an elliptical orbit with the earth at one end and the moon at the other; the orbit would become a distorted figure eight with the small loop of the eight around the moon. If the flight is such that the moon's pull on the rocket is approximately in the direction of flight when the rocket nears the moon, the whip effect will throw the craft out of its earth-moon orbit.

Precise calculations show that a rocket travelling at a velocity of 36,000 feet per second would be directed toward the orbit of Venus if only thirty-six feet a second were subtracted from its velocity. In terms of fuel weight a tremendous saving would be effected by this use of the moon as a "whip."

The growing belief that man will soon enter space, enforced by an announcement that a $50,000-a-year contract has been awarded to the Rocketdyne Division of North American Aviation, Inc., to explore the use of ions "as a possible source of economic power" for space ships and missiles, has led two lawyers to warn that before man takes off into space he should determine who owns it.

P.K. Roy of the International Civil Aviation Organization and Andrew G. Haley, general counsel of the Rocket Society, said that a legalistic "no man's land" exists when it comes to space travel. Unless

some international jurisdiction is established quickly over space, they warned, the dawning days of the space age are likely to be highlighted by a bitter nationalistic fight for control.

They suggested that there should be an international agreement declaring all space outside fifty or a hundred miles above the Earth international territory. Mr. Roy said it would be "unrealistic" and "completely absurd" to argue that national sovereignty extened for hundreds or thousands of miles above Earth.

Meanwhile, the Air Force has ordered comprehensive study into ion propulsion, which depends on thrust supplied by ions, or electrically charged atoms or molescules.

Such a propulsive system would work only outside Earth's atmosphere, which indicates that the United States is planning serious research into space-travel problems.

The birth of a star may have been witnessed by astronomers for the first time recently. George H. Herbig of Lick University compared two photographs of a part of the Orion Nebula, 1600 light-years distant, one photograph taken in 1947 and the other seven years later. The 1947 picture shows three stars embedded in a dark cloud of dust and gas. Some time during the next seven years they were joined by two additional stars.

Herbig and several associates have been studying a type of stars known as T Tauri stars, always found in the midst of dark interstellar clouds. They believe that in this case star birth has been observed for the first time.

An atom-powered battery the size of a coughdrop which is capable of delivering power for at least five years has been developed by a New York nuclear laboratory. The atom-cell uses a radioactive substance known as Promethium 147, once considered an atomic "waste-product," as its power source. This material produces energy over a long period and requires little shielding.

A unique characteristic of

the new cell is its superior performance in any temperature, even those as low as minus 200 degrees Fahrenheit. It functions by the emission of beta particles, which are then soaked up by a phosphor. The phosphor converts the particles into "atomic light," which are then soaked up by silicon diode photocells and converted into electric current. The principle is the same as that used in producing light in TV picture tubes by phosphors.

The unit, no bigger than a man's shirt button, is termed as safe to carry as a house key; the miniature power unit will actully give off less radiation than radium dials on wristwatches.

The United States is now in the midst of a revolution comparable in scope to the 19th century's industrial revolution: the "switching revolution." This comes from Professor John H. Van Vleck, University dean of engineering and applied science at Harvard, addressing an international conference on Switching Theory last spring.

Switching Theory is a new branch of science which deals with electrical devices that operate in two states—high-low, on-off, conducting-not conducting. Examples of such devices are relays, vacuum tubes, rectifiers, etc.—the basic constituents of telephone exchanges, computing machines, data-processing devices, and so on. Switching Theory is the theoretical basis for automation and the so-called "automatic factory."

Eight hundred scientists attended the conference, held at the Computation Laboratory of Harvard University. They discussed aspects of the new science which is making possible lightning-fast computers, new progress in telephone communications, and saving of much drudgery in clerical and computational work.

Switching Theory—the key to the future developments of mankind, an infant science which has already made giant strides.

—Continued from other side

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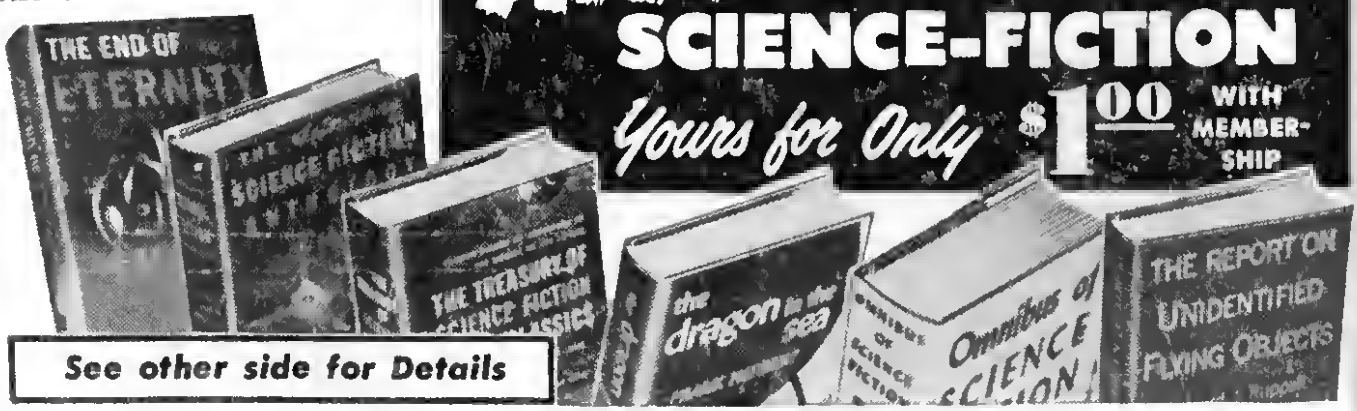

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